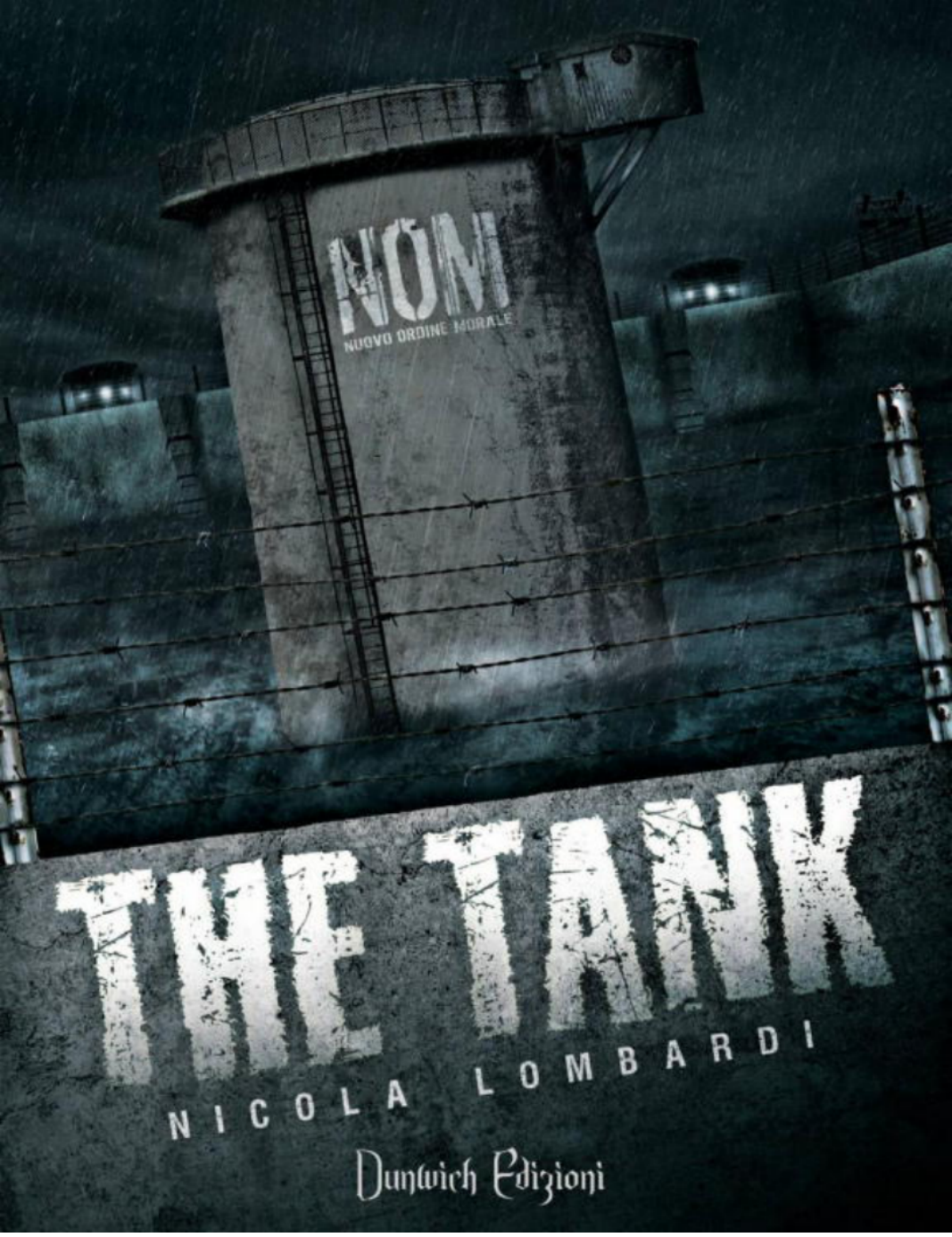
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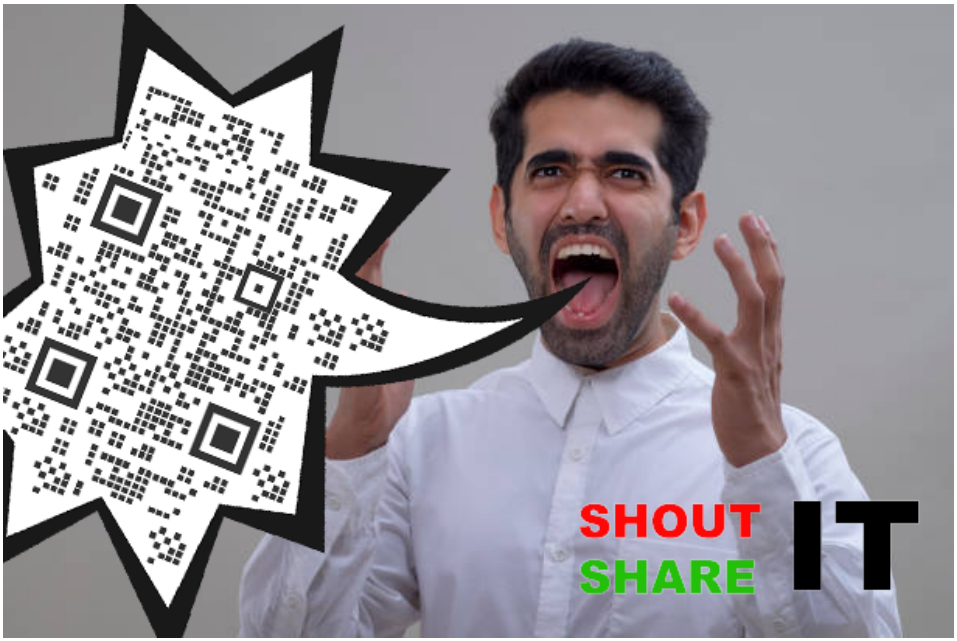
THE TANK
NICOLA LOMBARDI
Dunwich Edizioni


SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

The New Moral Order. A ferocious military dicatorship. A new, extreme detainment system in which the Tanks are the terrible instrument for a radical purge of society. Giovani Corte, a you man full of hopes, gets the long sought role of Keeper of Tank 9, where he will spend a whole year. And so he starts walking a new path – inexorable, clastrofobic, unreal – on the darkest corners of the human soul, towards the pitch-black heart of the horrors living both inside and outside us.

- Nicola Lombardi
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Nicola Lombardi
THE TANK
Translated by Daniele Anselmo

1 – The Arrival

The Tank looked huge, a dark grey cylinder that sternly contrasted with the dawn's pale colors and filled the heart. Giovanni Corte could not help but hold his breath when the huge silo of steel and concrete appeared beyond the mist. He felt a chill run through his body.

The early morning air got into his sleeves and under his collar while he was steadily approaching the structure with two NMO officers at his sides.

While they walked in utter silence tufts of grass and gravel crackled unpleasantly under their boots. Giovanni felt like he was walking on an expanse of brittle bones, trampling them underfoot.

The soldier at his right chocked a sneeze with his gloved fist. He was quite slender, which was pretty clear even under the large black coat, and the vaporous ghost that came out of his mouth quickly vanished in the chill of that newborn January. The other officer, thicker in build, rapidly glared at his comrade as to reprimand him for the sudden, albeit trivial, lack of self-control. The small four-pointed stars they both wore on their shoulders and berets weren't shining as usual, always polished like golden jewels; the cold, dull light hovering on the whole Camp 9 made them look dull, almost opaque.

Giovanni wanted to answer humorously, or even with just a simple "Bless you!", to lift that shroud of rigor, but all that came out of his mouth was a faint cough. He himself didn't understand if he was full of hope, fear, or what else. A new adventure was expecting him, all things considered. A stimulating experience, however demanding and hard, that would leave a permanent mark on him. And a considerable sum in his bank account. He walked with obvious confidence, but he was aware of the sharp blade in his side, which however couldn't completely dissipate the euphoria, the excitement that upset with levity the flow of his thoughts.

Clinging to one side of the cylindrical structure, a thick architectural body broke its circularity for a short segment. It was the slim, pointy elevator shaft that led all the way to the top, where the Keeper's billet was easily recognizable: a light grey bulky block of bricks and concrete which extended a few meters over the edge, detached from the protruding belt that crowned the Tank's summit. Basing on the maps he studied, Giovanni recognized the Ring that outlined the whole perimeter. Moreover, he knew about an external ladder on the opposite side, perfectly vertical, which led to an alternative entry – or exit, in case of elevator issues.

While walking he lowered his gaze to examine the wicket gate set

on the Tank, at a short distance from the pavement. It was a circular cover about half a meter in diameter, shut by a handle similar to those once used to seal submarines. The Gate of Cleansing, undoubtedly.

When they were about five or six steps away from the Tank's entrance the soldiers stopped, and Giovanni – who kept on walking lost in thought – had to move backwards to go back between them.

Without speaking they all looked up.

Elven meters in diameter. Nineteen in hight. Six of foundations. Concrete on the outside, embracing a steel upholstery for total thickness of fifty-four centimeters.

It would be impossible to hear the screams from the outside.

2 – Seven Days Earlier

When the door of the big, half-empty office closed, leaving him alone with General Aurelio Stevanich, Giovanni felt his heart sink.

The high officer stood with his back towards him, motionless and rigid in front of the room's only window. He kept his hands joined behind his back and looked like he was devising who knows what strategy to deploy and move his troops on the plain to defeat imaginary enemies. Giovanni had greeted him while going in and the general had greeted him back politely, but hadn't turned around. Now, the seconds that passed before they established any sort of civil relationship seemed to multiply, piling on, until Stevanich finally turned and pointed at the small black chair in front of his desk.

"Sit down, Corte. Or would you rather stand?"

Giovanni quickly examined him, trying not to show his nervousness too plainly. The role for which he applied and for which he was chosen required a resolve he felt abandoning him through his pores, but that he needed to fake.

Stevanich was one of the higher-ups of the New Moral Order, maybe the most important one; a man around which many rumors had spread, consequence of the fear the regime had so accurately stoked. Giovanni had read a biography of Vlad Tepes, the legendary Dracula, and in that moment the goriest episodes and anecdotes about unlucky protagonists who were called before the bloodthirsty prince and then invariably suffered bitter ends crept out of his mind. That wasn't the case, of course; but he could see the similarities.

He never met the general before, but he knew his fame and thought extremely highly of him because of his well-known inflexibility and the utter intolerance towards anyone who disregarded directives, orders and regulations. The expression *iron fist in a velvet glove* was only partially fitting to Stevanich's character, for whom the variant *iron fist in an iron glove* was coined. Apparently he had a subordinate put under arrest for six months just because he didn't greet him with due respect and some recruits seriously risked ending up in a Tank for being caught telling dirty jokes during a drill. Now, Giovanni didn't technically belong to the military; he was a civilian that, like many others, applied for the annual Tank Keeper position in Camp 9 and had been lucky enough to get the job. A job that, however, made him subject to martial law to a certain degree, so the feeling of being on the gridiron wasn't completely unjustified.

Filled with pride and apprehension, he thanked and sat. With slow steps the general reached his seat and did the same. He was a tall, lean man. The short, white hair made him look around sixty, but

the almost complete absence of wrinkles on his forehead and the black mustache starkly contradicted that impression. His looks were impeccable, the grey uniform full of coloured degrees and tabs, while the golden four-pointed start just above the heart seemed to release a warmth that helped temper the chill of his leaden eyes.

Now sitting, Stevanich was perfectly in front of the large tetragram, the NMO symbol hung on the wall at his back, so that three of the big black star's slender points – a symbol referring to the four cardinal points – seemed to sprawl from the top of his head and the sides of his neck. All in all, it was quite the evocative sight.

Opening the folder that was specifically placed on his desk, the general spoke without raising his gaze on his interlocutor: "I see you brilliantly passed every test, distinguishing yourself among eighty-seven candidates."

Giovanni coughed while settling on the chair. To that moment he had uncomfortably sat on the edge, so he slid backwards a bit until he felt the backrest.

"So, let's see… Giovanni Corte. Twenty-five. Orphan of both parents. Currently not in a relationship. Degree in political history. Hobbies: movies and literature. Many awards in athletics. No legal precedent, no smoke, no alcohol, no drugs…" The general closed the folder e tapped it with the palm of his hand. "Impressive, Corte. Very impressive."

Giovanni felt a clump of pride in his throat. "Thanks, general."

Stevanich fixed his eyes on him, eyes that looked like they had been carved in dirty ice. "Let it be clear that I'm completely satisfied with how you passed our selection process. However…" A three second pause that seemed like three minutes to Giovanni. "The regulations say that the Keeper position for the upcoming year is yours. I read your psychometric profile. Our commissars are experts of extreme and proven competence and I blindly trust their judgement. Nevertheless, I would like to make sure you are one hundred per cent motivated, without reserve. And I think you are."

Giovanni sighed, trying to find the right words to reassure him, but the general went on. "As you know, the position of Keeper is the sum of several roles: you will be a superintendent, an administrator, but first of all an *executor*." Another pause, to let the last word hover in the cool of the office, swirl to show all its sides. "I assume you are completely aware of the responsibility you take the moment you step into the Tank. Now, I want to ask you one last question. Just one."

"Please ask away, general."

"Aren't you afraid?"

On the wave of tension, Giovanni felt he could answer immediately, with ardor. But a sudden wavering took on him, slowing

down his reactions; he let a handful of seconds pass, then said:

"Absolutely not, General."

Stevanich stared at him in silence and Giovanni wondered if by any chance he had made a mistake. Could it have been a trick question? The figure of Vlad the Impaler sitting on his throne came back once again, together with the deadly consequences to which a wrong answer led without fail. He found himself evaluating other answers, maybe more appropriate than the one he had chosen. For example, he could have asked what he had to be afraid of; on the other hand he could have given the impression of being a little too bold…

When Stevanich nodded Giovanni realized with relief that his trepidation was unjustified. He felt the sweat chilling on his back.

"All right, Corte. You didn't answer with too much haste. You hesitated and that gives you honor. I appreciate people like you. The selecting committee did a good job." He stood up and Giovanni hastily did the same. "Get ready then. Thoroughly study the manual that will be given to you at the administrative office and be at Camp 9's gate, where the Operating Center's office is, on January 1st at exactly 7:30. I expect you prove yourself worthy."

"I won't disappoint you, general."

The handshake was short, but vigorous.

"And Corte, one more thing…"

The man remained impassive, but he felt his throat dry down. "Yes, general?"

"It goes without saying that I don't want any problem on your side. Anything that happens, every obstacle you might meet, solve it before it comes to my attention. We are clear on this, right?"

"All clear, General."

Crystal.

"Good. Then for now… have a good Christmas."

"Thank you, General. You too."

While reaching the exit, Giovanni could almost physically feel Stevanich's eyes on the back of his head; the absurd idea that the general got rid of the curt but fatherly expression with which he dismissed him, transforming it in an unsettling mask. Not evil, but lacking humanity.

3 – Oath and Assignment

The maws of the elevator opened without making the slightest noise. When Giovanni and his silent escort got inside the cabin- which could contain up to five or six people – their boots produced a sinister noise on the pavement, a plate of knurled metal.

Before one of the two soldier, the thicker one, could insert his ID card in a slot and press the black button on which an upward arrow was engraved, Giovanni turned around to look outside one last time. The greyness of the first morning of the year was haunting the whole landscape as if everything was covered by a thick layer of off-white ash. And when the double sliding doors closed their vertical mandibles an incomprehensible knot of discomfort formed in his guts.

Now it's really too late to go back, he thought. *But why would I?*

Steadily looking straight ahead of him he let pride flow into his heart, washing away the layer of apprehension that was trying to envelop him like wet gauze.

As soon as the elevator started moving the two soldiers turned their backs to the entrance. Giovanni did the same, sensing that once at the top other doors would open. After a few seconds, with a quiet clank that echoed down the vertical shaft, the hidden engine stopped and after new maws opened the three were in the Ring.

Stepping out, his escort one step ahead of him, Giovanni quickly looked left and right, where the wide turn of the corridor they were in disappeared both ways into the snow white walls following the building's shape. Short neon cylinders, placed on the ceiling each a couple of meters away from the following, emitted a pale light that reflected on the linoleum floor's half-faded green.

They headed right.

A few steps away from the elevator, on the same side, there was an extremely solid-looking metal door with faux wood painting. Reinforced, no doubt. He had accurately studied the simple layout of the building. It was the access to the Keeper's flat.

They came to a halt. While the leaner soldier was fussing with a set of keys Giovanni started looking around.

A bit further from where they were, on the outer side of the circular corridor, another door with thick dark glass panels drew his attention. A faint glimpse of golden light flickered from a small metal plaque beside the massive steel jamb. A casual observer could mistake it for a second elevator, ma Giovanni knew perfectly well it wasn't. On the manual it was named *access door to the isolation and elimination chamber*, a tiny room better know as *the Shutter*.

Two forceful turns and the lock sprang with a loud noise.

The soldier that had opened the door looked at his comrade, who nodded in return; he then took a finely printed card out of his pocket and turning to face Giovanni he cleared his throat before starting to read. It was time for the assignment speech and the consequent oath.

"In the name of the New Moral Order I assign to you, Giovanni Corte, pro-tempore Keeper, the keys to Camp 9's Tank…" Giovanni felt like even his heart has stopped to listen. "…so that you may guard it's whole content until the last day of your mandate. Do you swear to loyally serve the Order and to prove yourself worthy of the task you've been called to undertake?"

A peremptory whisper from the other soldier lashed out as quick as a toad's tongue: "Hand on your heart."

Giovanni promptly obeyed and solemnly pronounced the first of the three: "I do."

"Do you swear to take responsibility for every action you may make while doing your job?"

"I do."

"And finally: do you swear in no way you will divulge any information you may learn while operating inside the tank?"

"I do."

"Are you aware of the legal consequences that come by breaking an oath to the Order?"

"Yes, I am." His voice cracked a little and he felt ashamed.

"If that's so you, Giovanni Corte, from this moment on you officially take on the role of Tank Keeper for the duration of the current solar year." The soldier handed him the small set of keys and Giovanni grabbed it with a decisiveness.

The soldiers clicked their heels in unison and the sound got lost in the Ring's curves.

A few moments of uncomfortable silence followed. Giovanni couldn't remember whether he was supposed to say something or if the short ceremony was actually over. He allowed himself to say a quick: "Thank you."

The two soldiers exchanged an unintelligible glance, then looked back at Giovanni. Had there been a faint grin in that split second, or was it just the neon light on their faces? Giovanni couldn't say and he wasn't all that interested.

The most authoritative looking soldiers – even if judging from the stars on their uniforms the two seemed to be both sergeants – spoke with a neutral voice: "As you know, there are no deliveries on January 1st, so you have all the time you need to get used to the place. Anything you may need, you know the communication procedure."

"Of course…"

"Good luck with your work, Keeper."

“Thank you.”

The two soldiers headed toward the elevator, unmoved, and Giovanni stood and watched them disappear behind the sliding doors. The dark buzz of the descending cabin vibrated in his ears, steadily growing quieter, until a thud informed him that his escort had reached its destination.

From that moment on he was the only one left in the Tank. And of course the *guests*, as the manual named them. Giovanni could never understand whether that term was only accidentally ironic or the person who chose it wanted to mock – yet always respecting the limits imposed by the ever-present martial formalism – the condition in which all those inside the Tank passed their last days.

* * *

There were five keys in the set. The one that opened the reinforced door of the flat was long, similar to a two-headed axe. Three others were smaller and they were for the rooms of the flat itself, while the last one, recognizable by the green plaque, had to be for the security exit, also called, with very little technicality – *Escape*. The keys were attached to a ring with a metal four-pointed star hanging from it. It didn’t look all too comfortable to keep in a pocket. A tad of masochism would be needed to appreciate it.

The door to the flat, now wide open, led to a narrow vestibule that contained only a chest and an old-fashioned three-legged hall stand, maybe a remnant of some old dismantled office. A calendar with an NMO symbol hung from a wall on the side. Giovanni wondered how he would feel while turning the twelfth page.

There were three doors, one for each of the smaller keys. The one in front of him led to the kitchen, extremely clean and functional, with light colours and wooden surfaces, all bathed in a white light coming from a small window placed between two walls and a cupboard. The small flat screen of a television was almost perfectly fitting in the space between two shelves; only the lack of an handle prevented mistaking it for a microwave (which was on another shelf, opposite to it). In one corner, on the floor, there was a sturdy grey styrofoam bin used for food supplies and garbage disposal.

He instinctively opened the fridge with simple curiosity: it was already filled with food and drinks, arranged with a precision worthy of an advertisement photo. He then tried to open the sink tap: a clear, cold stream of water (coming from the large aqueduct conveying to each of the Camp’s buildings) promptly came out. Excellent.

The door on the right side of the vestibule led to the bedroom.

His gaze, attracted by the light, flew to the window, completely filled by the sky's glare; then it slowly hovered to the bulky three-door wardrobe, the bedside table, the queen-size bed covered by a brown sheet that reminded him of the military and hospitals. Everything was very spartan-looking, but comfortable. He didn't fail to notice that his luggage, two suitcases and a bag, were already there, as they previously agreed. Efficiency on every level.

Over the bed's headboard a white-lettered motto on a black background had been framed:

NEMO ME IMPUNE LACESSIT

No one can harm me unpunished. On one side of the writing there was the ever-present red tetragram. Opposite to the wardrobe a small door with no lock led to an evenly small bathroom equipped with a shower (he was well informed about the water's temperature: a capacious LPG tank was placed underground at a short distance from the Tank, fueling the small boiler that was fixed on the wall).

The third room, on the left of the hall, was the Control Room, a windowless room floodlit by a long neon tube. It was a bit bigger than the bedroom and on the far side there was a console full of buttons, switches and warning lights, a 70x50 screen on top of it. The screen was on. Giovanni took a couple of steps in, choosing not to look right away at the greenish figures moving inside the big monitor.

He was prepared for everything and his entrance in the Tank signed the end of his training; he could rightly say to know the place in its every aspect even without having stepped foot inside it before then. There was no handover, either. As a matter of fact he didn't have the chance to speak to his predecessor, who was probably escorted out not fifteen minutes before his arrival.

Since the NMO had seized power over the country everything worked by very rigorous schemes. Respect for the rules, self-discipline, knowing to be part of a whole and intransigence towards transgressors. These were the true four points of the tetragram. Giovanni felt them all well engraved in his head and heart. But no matter how hard he tried to strip himself of any useless emotion he still felt an overwhelming pride. For being chosen, for winning over any other aspirant, for *being there*.

He stopped with his legs lightly spread, crossed his arms and finally checked what the big screen was offering him.

An expanse of clumping human beings, bodies teeming supine, kneeling, prone or curled up like fat green-grey worms or frail, wretched foetuses.

A silent churning of forms, shadows, disjointed limbs, everything in an almost fluorescent world corrupted by the greenish, mouldy luminescence emitted by rot. In reality this effect was due to the NV

filter. The camera hung from the Tank's ceiling like a chandelier, pointing downward, connected to the Control Room twenty-four hours a day, feeding it with images of all those bastards in the utter darkness, thrashing, crawling on one another, screaming their inaudible hate, their pain, sometimes raising their wide-open eyes similar to opalescent dots.

Several bodies lay still, but the majority was shaking like a bait on the hook. A bearded man, right in center of the frame, managed to stand up, his hands tied behind his back, and raised his gaze towards the camera. The small, milky eyeballs made him – like all the others guests, when they kept their eyes open – vaguely resemble a demon. His mouth moved, speaking useless words; then, a movement from the prisoners he was standing on top of forced him to fall backwards like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Those were the most recent arrivals, the surface. At a first glance they were about forty. How many layers were behind them? Nobody could say for sure. Another thing that was impossible to tell was how many corpses there were inside the Tank at any given time. Not that it mattered, anyway. There were so many bodies inside that ascertaining how many were still breathing, especially in the lower layers, would be quite the feat. His curiosity wouldn't be satisfied. *How many angels can dance on the tip of a needle?* Giovanni smiled remembering that stupid old question.

For those how deserved the Tank death was the only absolute certainty. When it came, be it days or weeks, was irrelevant. Maybe not for them, the *guests*, but the fact that they were in there implied that they deserved it. The manual mentioned the subject with brevity; everything else was left to logic and guesswork. Suffocation was the most common cause of death, that much was quite obvious. It could also be injuries or fractures from the fall or self-inflicted wounds to shorten the agony; all this, of course, while waiting for the Cleansing to tend to the overpopulation.

Giovanni stared at that tangle for a few more seconds, finding it similar to a cauldron where weird reptiles and anthropomorphic amphibians were boiling; when he came to, he started rubbing his hands.

"Everything is all right, Giovanni." He told himself loudly. "All perfect."

He wasn't used to talking to himself and he wouldn't start now. He didn't have any need for neither encouragement nor reiterating his satisfaction. He approved of the NMO, of its methods, its decision and its politics. Those who were thrown in the Tank weren't human anymore, they lost every right to be a part of the renewed social fabric. What followed was that any moralist fit – legacy of an induces,

hypocritical and finally surpassed moral – was to be compared to a momentary itch, a speck in the eye.

Yet even one second of weakness, an uncertain sigh, was enough to make Stevanich's question come to his mind: *Are you not afraid?*

"No", he said, closing his eyes and breathing as deeply as he could. "I am no."

And he was sincere.

4 – Inspection

His first day in the Tank passed without any particular events, taking time to explore.

Without any rush he places his clothes in the wardrobe, the towels and bathrobes in the bathroom, he filled the shelves with razors, shaving foam, bars of soap, drugs… he felt like a traveller, excited and full of expectations, in the suite of a new hotel. Moreover, while trying to fit a shoebox in one of the wardrobe's lower shelves he found a pair of weights five kilograms each. Perfect: they would help him in his purpose to find time each day for staying fit and avoid softening.

Back in the vestibule he noticed the Spy, over the entrance door; it was a red quartz lamp that lit together with a beep every time the elevator started. It was appropriate that the Keeper knew when someone – or something, in case of food or clean sheets – was coming up.

In the kitchen, once checking the content of the fridge (cold cuts, cheese, tuna, canned meat, milk, fruit, trays covered by aluminum foil, fruit juice, but no wine) and in the cupboard (tea bags, coffee, crispy bread slices, breadsticks, spices and dressings) he turned his attention to the television.

As he already knew, he could only watch three thematic channels via cable – news, cinema, documentaries – plus a radio channel for listening to music. The schedule went on seamlessly, one movie after the other, one documentary after the other, with periodic replicas, and it was not possible to choose. No problem. The NMO was okay with it and so was he. He would watch whatever was on, or do something else.

He went back to the Control Room.

On the wall to the right, half-hidden behind the door, there was a four-store bookshelf, not a very large one either, to which he didn't pay much attention earlier. It was filled with all the books the NMO made available to the Keeper, a hundred or so, a micro-library used to pass the time. And he would have a lot of time to read. He ran a finger and his gaze on the books, catching random names: Hemingway, D'Annunzio, Verne, Calvino, Brontë, London, Melville… quite the diverse collection. There was something for every taste. Good, he would take advantage of it to fill many gaps.

A shelving on the right held some binders. He took a couple out to find out they were empty. It would be his job to fill them. There was no trace of all his predecessor's work; the change of Keeper implied the transfer of all the binders, logs and dossiers of the

previous year to the central office. He would't have any real models to base on, but he didn't need any; he remembered every single form he studied on the Manual. It was enough.

He forced himself not to look to the agonizing guests on the big screen, so he approached the console looking at the big chest of drawers lower on the right. He pulled the wheeled office chair, sat down and the first of the three metal drawers. It was filled with stationery, from pencil leads to a hole puncher, from rubber bands to a stapler. He would bet that every single item was registered. The second drawer contained a thick, green-covered register, the famous DMR, the *Daily Management Register*. Every procedure had to be manually written on it on a daily basis, including notes and highlights: it was a professional diary for the Keeper. Good.

The third drawer was locked, but a small key was hanging from the keyhole. Giovanni unlocked it and even before making the drawer slide open he could guess what was inside. There it was: a gun in a simple leather holster to secure it to his belt. He lifted it and unholstered it with a certain degree of deference, weighing it in his hand. An FS 93.9 Beretta with fifteen-rounds magazines, and it was his for a whole year. For a defensive purpose. For any circumstance. A magazine was already inserted and another one was sealed in its packaging inside the drawer. He put everything away and stood up, then sat on the stuffed office chair, relaxing his back against the seatback.

Next to the console was a fax machine and beside it a fourteen-inch monitor with a keyboard and a wireless mouse; it wasn't hard to recognise it for what was unofficially named the *Postman*. Its official name was *Direct Communication Terminal*, but all technical terminology was destined to be substituted with easier and equally efficient words. There was a channel between the Operative Center, near the entrance of Camp 9, and the Keeper's flat, that was used when the fax machine would not do. (There was no internet connection: the NMO didn't think of it as necessary, or appropriate, for the Tank.)

On the screen a blue tetragram on a lighter blue background was slowly rotating and Giovanni thought he couldn't actually expect to find a different screensaver. He slightly moved the mouse and a white screen with an intermittent cursor for writing appeared on the Postman. Curiosity took the best of him and, without considering how useless it would be, he pressed the question mark button, then ENTER. A small envelope-shaped icon immediately appeared and flew away. Why did he do that? He just sent a stupid message to who-knows-who. Not to the general, he hoped…

A high-pitched. sudden *beep* immediately made his tongue go dry.

A new envelope started beeping behind his question mark. Did they already answer him?

With a heavy heart he moved the cursor on the icon, clicked, and read the three words that appeared in front of him: *"Is there a problem, Keeper?"*

"Such efficiency." But embarrassment immediately followed the amazement. He behaved like a kid. He had to do something.

"No problem", he wrote *"I apologise, I just wanted to test the DCT. Thank you."*

He hoped that showing competence by using a technical term would make up for his levity. But after a minute or so without further answers from the Center, he got up and went out from the Control, the doubt still in his mind.

* * *

He set the table with plastic dishes and cutlery (he found plenty in a small cupboard beside the sink). He found some meat balls in a small styrofoam tray and put one in the microwave. He added some stick bread, mortadella, an apple and fresh water, then had lunch while light-heartedly watching a documentary about the daily life of an Eskimo.

With a full stomach he then decided to make a turnip inspection of the Ring to avoid falling asleep.

He looked at the Shutter beyond the dark-glass door, pressing his forehead and shielding himself with a hand from the glare of the neon lights, but he could only see his reflection, turbid and dull. He wanted to open the door, get to know the clever room he knew only by the diagram he studied, but without the code he had to input on the panel there was little he could do. He would receive it the following day. Okay, he could wait.

He kept walking, choosing a counter-clock path, and the rhythmic creak of his soles on the linoleum floor made him imagine some mice running beyond the curve, impossible to reach. He wondered whether his predecessor had come up with a name for that blind spot in the ring, impossible to see no matter how much he accelerated. *The Dark Side* would be a good name, fitting. Like the moon's.

He stretched his right arm out, running his fingers on the concave wall. When he was a kid, he liked doing it with a stick while walking near gratings and gates. If his mother was with him, she would slap him, because it was a very noisy game. Now there was only a rustle and a pinch on his fingertips. *You wouldn't say anything now, mom.* He thought. *If you could see me now, you would be proud of me. And you*

too, dad, right?

He came to the security door, the so-called Escape, just it time avoid crying, focusing his thoughts back on the inspection.

It was a common green-painted fire break door. He tried turning the handle out of habit, knowing perfectly it was closed. He took the keys from his pocket and inserted the key with the green-coloured plaque in the lock, turned it open, lowered the handle, pulled the door… and the vertigo made him shiver. He felt inexistent insects crawling down his legs.

A cold stream of air immediately passed through the gap and a whitish ray of light did the same. An invasive breeze whistled in his ears, ruffling his hair. Separating him from the fall there was just a metal platform with a railing. In the distance he could see the wire fence that formed the Camp's perimeter. The buildings behind the Tank weren't visible. All he could see was a large patch of grey, barren land that gave away to the brown colours of a woodland area, from a height that Giovanni found unsettling. He cautiously lowered his gaze, to his right, to look at the ladder that disappeared towards the base of the building.

He had seen enough. He closed the door and put the keys back with a layer of what on his forehead.

Turning his back toward the Escape he saw in front of him the Porthole for Direct Inspection. It was mounted on the inside wall of the ring, the convex one. It was a round window, very similar to a ship's, made with a clever game of reflections and mirrors that – despite being set on a vertical surface – let him see almost perpendicularly inside the Tank in the event that the emergency lights (there were several even inside his flat) turned on. In case of power outage, where using the big monitor in the Control, it would be possible to verify the guests' condition by looking at the abyss through it.

Giovanni approached it and, exactly as he did with the Shutter, the tried to see something. But finding himself looking at a dark puddle in which his face floated, curved and deformed, made him desist. Moreover, he was bugged by the stupid idea that inside, down there, someone was looking at *him*…

The strange silence weighing on the Ring unsettled him. It was enough for a first day inspection.

He headed towards his starting point, skirting the wall on the right side. His pace was a bit quicker, but he didn't notice.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon slipped away on a western movie, a documentary about metalworking in Ancient Rome and some relaxation on the bed, reading poetry from D'Annunzio without any particular captivation.

His dinner was particularly frugal: some toasted bread with cheese and orange juice. That first day seemed to have no end, despite doing next to nothing, but the overwhelming amount of new information tired him as if he had exercised for hours; that difference was that in this last case he would be very hungry, while now he just wanted to lie down and turn his brain off

* * *

Sitting on the edge of his bed he stared at the tip of his toes as if seeing for the first time.

If only he would raise his gaze he could see from the window the vastness of Camp 9, it's quiet, restful stillness, now that the sunlight stopped leaking from the hills' back crests leaving purple stains in the lower part of the sky. He could see how the annoyed treetops were shaking off invisible birds made of shadows and winds; he would recognise, half-swallowed by the evening, the buildings where the unknown lives of soldiers, sentries, maintenance staff, officers and all those who worked with commendable zeal in that branch of the judiciary mechanism went on. Wired fences and barbed wire – barely visible from afar – drew a huge, crooked figure that only from above could maybe make sense, imply a project.

He didn't raise his gaze. Too many thoughts were slowly churning in his head. With a bowed head, now that he had nothing left to do but lie down and try to sleep, he felt the huge responsibility he took on himself when he walked in that office a lot more vividly. He would have to face whatever came to him one day after another. He had a whole year in front of him, but it would eventually come to pass. He made a choice. And he had been chosen. Now, instead of racking his own brain, he thought it would be more useful to stare at his feet, studying his toes' slow and meticulous undulating movement, waiting for his mind to stabilise.

5 – First Deliveries

There would be nine deliveries during that second day of January, divided in groups of three. A little above average, but it would compensate for the previous day's lack of activity.

Giovanni received via fax a list of the *delivered*, a document he thoroughly examined. After studying every procedure using duplicates he finally had his first official communication in his hands. He smiles. It was a tangible proof that it was all really happening and he wasn't living a reverie, as it would often happen to him during his months of exams and selections.

He hadn't slept much that night. Sleep – however tired he thought to be – arrived late. It often happens to be physically tired but with a brain so bombarded by stimuli that it just won't stay put. He was stuck in some kind of dream, at least as far as he could remember. It seemed to him to have experienced a very personal, weird version of what would be his first delivery, but now, one hour after waking up and with a stomach full of coffee, he found impossible to gather the details scattered somewhere in his mind.

The document – written on the NMO's headed paper and signed by a Penal Executive Office's supervisor – had twelve names and surnames on it, together with the age and charges for which each one of them had been tried and condemned. In a corner, after the UC acronym, the Unlocking Code 473 had been handwritten.

To the attention of the est. Keeper of Tank 9 was written on the recipient's space. It had a nice ring to it. He thought that, more or less in that same moment, his colleagues were feeling a similar wave of pride receiving the announcement of their first delivery, being at the beginning of their brand new year-long assignment like he was.

The Tank he was assigned to was the most recently built, being only three years old. It was also the tallest and most capacious. The other eight, scattered throughout the nation's territory, were barely twelve meter tall and managed at most fifty/sixty people per month. This one could host at least twice those people, as stated by the previous year's movements. Moreover, they weren't as well equipped on a technological level; the oldest Tanks didn't even have structures like the Shutter, but used more rudimental devices like hatches and slides. He would be a liar denying that such observations didn't please him. He had heard voices about a tenth Tank, but it was nothing more that a project; they didn't even agree on its location. It would probably be for female prisoners, as it was for all even-numbered Tanks. The NMO opposed sexual promiscuity, even if confined in such an extreme environment.

He looked out his bedroom's window just in time to see the van approaching the Tank. He quickly looked at his watch: 7:59. He then re-read one line of the fax, which he had fixed to a clipboard he found in the Control: *first delivery: 8:00 A.M.*

"Great…" He said.

The vehicle parked beside the elevator's entrance, but it was already out of the Keeper's line of sight, who had leaned to watch the manoeuvres, but to no avail. Giovanni got back to the vestibule, breathing in deeply and, with a big sigh, getting rid of the tension he felt contracting his stomach's muscles. With the fingers of his right hand he caressed the holster that was strapped to his waist and almost felt the weapon vibrating with a life of its own.

In a flash he mentally reviewed the various phases of the procedure he had simulated so many times before, both during training and in his mind.

The red Spy lit up and a loud buzz, short, hoarse, but peremptory, informed him that the elevator was moving up. Giovanni cleared his throat, hating himself for the palpitations that were slowing down his reaction times; he then opened the reinforced door and stepped in the Ring.

With wide steps he reached the elevator and stopped in front of it right in the moment when the sliding doors opened.

The five people inside the cabin – two EGs (Escort Guards, shaved heads and mirrored sunglasses, one of them on the front of the group and one in the back) and three civilians – stood staring at him for a few seconds, as if his presence there surprised them. He stared back at them in silence, feeling his throat suddenly go dry. Had he forgotten something? No, he was sure there were no particular formulae or greetings for that circumstance.

Then, with a brisk nod from the soldier standing right in front of him, barely perceivable yet very eloquent, he realized he had made an enormous mistake: he got confused because of his excitement, like a rookie at his first day of work.

When the convicts were being delivered, the Keeper had to stand in front of the Shutter, not the elevator. How could he start off with such a blunder? He felt a sudden warmth starting from behind his ears and expanding to his cheeks.

Trying to maintain a neutral expression he quickly turned around and, with a martial bearing, he approached the Shutter's glass door. He could hear the steps of the five people following behind him and almost felt a wave of mockery and blame coming from the two expressionless soldiers. He cursed himself for his clumsiness. He new that form and substance were equally important in the eyes of the NMO and he hoped that his mistake would have no consequences.

When he was in position, Giovanni turn back to the newly arrived. In that moment the first of the EGs, who had a small, reddish cut on his left cheek coming from a hastily shave, took a form out of its pocked and read it out loud: “As per disposition 4816/35 we deliver today the following convicts to the Keeper of Tank 9: Calogero Calatafimi, fifty-six, child abduction…”

Giovanni raised the clipboard and drew a tick beside the first name.

“…Pietro Calatifimi, forty-nine, child abduction; Goran Pashkov, thirty-one, multiple murder while driving drunk.”

Giovanni finished ticking each name, then grabbed the form the guard was handing him and signed it, trying not to meet his gaze: he wouldn’t be able to see them anyway, hidden as they were behind lenses that would only reflect two small reflections of his own face; he also felt that, had he been able to see it, it would be condescending and paternalistic, annoying him so much he would end up making some other unforgivable mistake.

He gave the form back with an automatic motion, then focused on the polished push-button panel beside the Shutter’s door and began to input the Unlocking Code, trying to appear confident. The UC was changed every day and, for security reason, had to be known only by the Keeper and the Centre’s staff. Because of this he kept his clipboard up to serve as barrier with a hint of childish satisfaction. Moreover, the number that was given to him wasn’t the right one: he had to add the day’s number to each digit. It was January 2nd, so the UC 473 would become 695. Giovanni held his breath while pressing the golden buttons, spacing each digit using asterisks.

The unlocking program allowed only one mistake. In the event he would input the code incorrectly once, a red spy would start beeping. In case of a second mistake the EGs had to temporarily suspend the procedure and investigate. Only after proving the Keeper’s good faith could the procedure be resumed. Of course that would cost him a warning. Three warnings and you were out. Giovanni thought back at the pock-marked face of Alex couldn’t-remember-the-surname, the guy who graded right behind him, who would be more that happy take his place.

No way, friend. Find something else to do.

The UC worked. Giovanni breathed out quietly in order to hide the apprehension that almost paralysed him while an invisible hydraulic mechanism made the glass and metal door slide in the circular wall. It was like a whisper, a silky rustle. The small room known as the Shutter appeared in front of him.

It was a tiny room with crystal walls, extending over the Tank’s circumference for about a meter. A sort of balcony, about as large as

the elevator's cabin, small and closed on all sides, suspended over the dark, circular abyss ful of dying bodies. From where they stood, Giovanni and the others couldn't hear nor smell anything. The Shutter's far wall was a second two-shutter door named Disposal Door (the staff had re-named it *the Suffering*, quoting the inscription on the gates of Hell in Dante Alighieri's "Inferno").

"Come on, marche!"

Giovanni came to. It was the second Guard who had talked, the one behind the small ground. Using the barrel of his standard-issue Beretta 13-S as a prod he made the three convicts, rigorously in a line, approach the Shutter, while Scar – the one with a wound on his cheek – had moved on one side to let them pass and make sure that everything would go according to plan. It was like Giovanni hadn't really noticed them before that moment. He was so concentrated on his task and his pondering that he had forgotten about a whole chapter of the manual: *interrelations with the convicts.*

Convicts are not human beings anymore.

Convicts have no right to speak.

The Keeper has no obligation to talk to the convict, unless he has to enforce order, together with the EGs.

Convicts are *cattle*. No, that wasn't written on the manual. But it was implied. To the NMO, certain deeds and choices equalled regressing. Cattle Nothing more.

Giovanni gave them a hard look. Two children kidnappers. A drunk-driving murderer. Yet another one. He felt the urge to push them himself to make them get in the Shutter faster, but he knew he had to behave. Feelings had to be suffocated, annihilated: the instructors repeated it over and over again.

While walking past him, The three convict's eyes shortly crossed his. They didn't show any particular emotion, probably because they weren't feeling any. They had been sedated. The treatment was administered half an hour before the delivery and wore off half an hour after the Unloading. The procedure was used to limit, if not completely eliminate, any sudden panic-induced reaction. On the other hand it also relived the convicts of the terrifying experience of being in the Shutter. Giovanni thought they didn't deserve such magnanimity and should be forced to live every single horrifying moment. What comforted him was that once the effect of the pill they had to ingest wore off they would have all the time in the world to reach new peaks of unparalleled horror, pain and despair.

The three walked shuffling their feet with vacuous gazes, getting in the Shutter like calves to the slaughter. As usual, their hands were tied behind their backs by narrow, yet resistant milled plastic cuffs: once tightened they were worse that the regular metal ones.

Once they were position once behind the other – the with his chest pressed against the Suffering and the last one with his back barely beyond the first door – the Shutter had reached its maximum capacity. A joke recurred in the training course, probably recycled year after year. The instructor would suddenly ask: *"How many people fit in the Shutter?"* to which the candidates would promptly answer: *"Three."* The answer was right, of course. But they could be unexpectedly be corrected: *"Wrong. None. Only cattle fit in the Shutter."* To which they would start laughing, only to be immediately stopped by a quick hand gesture. It was better if the higher ups, for example Stevanich, didn't hear certain jokes. His sense of humor was next to zero. Had word of such amenities reach his ear, nobody could predict his reaction. And Giovanni, even if he thought of him as a modern Vlad Tepes, felt more in sintony with him than with the goliardic spirit that almost always found its home in the lower ranks of strict and intransigent hierarchies.

"Keeper?"

Scar's mellow, yet mocking voice called him to his duty. This time he wouldn't just shut up, so he stared right in the man's mirror lenses: "Don't worry, Guard. I know my duty."

After such an answer, not wanting to give the Guard time to retort, he brought his thumb to the Closing button and vigorously pressed it, tightening his lips. Again the hidden mechanism's quiet rustle. The dark glass door closed.

From the outside Goran's hair and red jersey were barely visible as he was the nearest, while the other two were no more that opaque silhouettes. It seemed to him that they were dangling on their feet, lost, trapped like rats in a glass cage.

The next button was the Disposal one (and there too trivial jokes about toilets and excrements had sprawled). Giovanni waited for a second, implicitly stating that he was aware of what he had to do and how he should do it.

From the Ring's side a muffled *clang* could be heard, followed by a buzz similar to the one of a dentist's drill. Not the sharp, piercing one, rather the slow, chunky one that rotated with a low-pitched noise making the whole skull vibrate while extracting a rotten tooth. It was the sound of the platform moving.

What was happening inside the Shutter was inexorable in its simplicity. The Suffering had opened and the gum platform had started rotating forward. A small treadmill.

Giovanni counted in his head to thirteen, as he had been taught, then once again pressed the Disposal button. The buzz stopped immediately and another *clang* informed them that the Suffering had closed. Operation complete.

Scar didn't comment. He wrote something on the form – probably the time at which the procedure had concluded – then said to Giovanni: "All being well, we will be back for two other deliveries today."

Giovanni lifted the clipboard with the fax and showed it as if it was a giant banknote. "As per communication. And be on time."

The two EGs looked at each other and, even if their expression remained unchanged, one could very well read the silent question that remained hung up in the air: *Which of us is going to shoot him?*

No, pals, you can't do that was Giovanni's answer, who simply started at their glasses. When the Guards turned on their heels and moved towards the elevator one could hear the noise of the ice breaking off their bodies to leave invisible puddles on the linoleum floor.

Giovanni waited, listening to the clattering noise of the elevator cabin's descent down the concrete shaft.

Bravo, he told himself.

He immediately realized that his childish self-complementing was a two-bladed weapon. Yes, he had behaved well, both with the Disposal procedure and with the EGs, but he sure didn't help strengthening the *esprit de corps* that the NMO's higher ups valued so much. It was the barely noticeable movement of the clipboard insistently tapping against his thigh that made him realize his hands were shaking.

* * *

Once back in his flat he rapidly went to drink a glass of cold water. While he tried to focus on each second of pleasure given to him by the liquid caressing his dry throat he felt his mind detaching from all those all-in-all inane reflections on his behaviour and adhering, as if attracted by a giant magnet, to the true core of the matter: he had just carried his first *execution*. It was no simulation. He was finally truly part of the *garbage disposal*, as he had heard calling the Disposal. Three examples of the garbage *corroding the Country day after day* had been *detached from the social context* (expression taken from the manual word by word) and he was on the frontline for a whole year. Cleaning. That was the word. Everything else could easily slide to the background.

He went to the Control Room (already re-named *Control* for short) and sat before the console.

There they were, on the screen. Greenish, bent, crawling: his first three disposals. The gaping mouths, the legs shaken by convulsions,

the feet that convulsively hit heads, stomachs, backs… he shivered, feeling a euphoric tingling on his skin. There had to be an awful smell in there. And the dark was almost absolute, apart from the dim neon light coming from the Ring and through the opaque walls of the Shutter, up on the top. A true hellhole.

He raised the hand that still held the empty glass in a toast to whoever invented the Tank system. It was that rigor, that inflexibility, that he had so enthusiastically greeted with the rise of the NMO.

No more in-between measures, no more accepting everything, no more cultural and religious invasions, no more impunity, with the suffocating rhetoric of idiotic do-godders. And also no more overcrowded jails, indulgences, nepotism, the *soft line*, which was no more than intellectual weakness, unequivocal symptom of decadence of any social order.

Since the NMO had seized the power crime had decreased by 60% in ten years. Giovanni remembered how things were before. He was young when the military coup that ended that unbearable farce known as the Fourth Republic. He had read a lot about it and the comparison wasn't hard at all. The ancient pillars of corruption, clientelism, immorality and false politics had been destroyed with wrecking balls. If strong-arm tactics were necessary, well, bless them!

The movement in the screen didn't seem to stop anytime soon. Giovanni observed it driven by curiosity while his body started relaxing after all the physical tension. At that moment he realized he hadn't been able to watch the three convicts fall, filling him with dissatisfaction. Could he do something about that?

Sure.

He knew the console's commands, like he knew that every single moment of the closed-circuit recordings was stored in the enormous hard drive in the central database. He didn't hesitate and, willing to put his knowledge into practice, switched from REC mode to PLAY, then rewinded the timeline until he found what he was looking for… there it was!

The Shutter was always visible in the lower section of the screen. It was practically a darker rectangle on the circular edge. Giovanni sat back on the armchair and when the Suffering's shutters opened he couldn't help but whistle with satisfaction.

The first silhouette hesitated, standing on the edge like a shy diver. Then, undoubtedly pushed by the other two convicts, who were being dragged by the moving platform, he turned on his heels trying to get back in and fell on his back. Down under many shining dots disappeared and heads bent like mushroom that suddenly rot; the prisoners had recognised the Shutter's sound, shut their eyes and moved trying to avoid the crash. Which happened, of course; found

and painful in its greenish silence. The second convict jumped and "landed" on his feet, immediately bending over in a whirlwind of bodies twisting and screaming. There was a way to listen to the sounds coming from the Tank but Giovanni was so fascinated that didn't think about turning the audio channel on. The third convict landed on his head, violently becoming a part of the *big family* (another unofficial term. Maybe he had managed to break his neck.

Giovanni had heard tales about convicts preferring trying to die in the fall rather than agonizing for an undefined amount of time. This was possible, of course, only if there was a long distance between the Shutter and the superficial layer of guests. If that was not the case, a voluntary self-harming fall could only lead to painful wounds and broken bones. There were even cases where those who were already lying in that mass of bodies tried to exploit the newcomers' arrival to try and get their neck broken.

They were plausible stories. But there were also some that, on the contrary, were more fit for old drunk seawolves trying to tell the most absurd story, like in Moby Dick. For example, Giovanni was shocked hearing a third or fourth hand account about the convicts of a Tank managing to stand against the wall, climbing on each other's shoulder like the members of a circus until they reached the Shutter. Balance wasn't an issue since their hands were free (helping each other with their teeth, breaking the plastic cuffs wasn't so difficult). Once on the top, one of the convicts supposedly managed to open the Suffering – or whatever its nickname in that particular Tank was – and entered the Shutter. Only the Keeper's presence of mind (he was by chance walking by the screen) avoided a disaster. The ingredients for an urban legend were all there.

It was a suggestive story anyway.

There was another tale about a convict – whose name seemed to change each time, even if every version seemed to agree on him being a dealer of heavy drugs – who before falling had spread his legs, propping himself up against the walls of the Shutter; the Keeper was forced to open the first door and he was almost thrown in the Tank by the convict. That was a good one too, one of those that sticks into your head and never leaves.

Like the one of a guy who hid a lighter in his rectum and tried to set himself and all the others on fire, but the continuous movements of the human mass made him sink, making his plan fail. Of course there were other versions were he was hiding a swiss knife and this kind of episodes lead the NMO to more through body inspections (this was actually fake since nobody thought about confiscating from convicts belts or other pieces of clothing with which they could kill themselves; once they were thrown in the Tank, what they did was their business).

There were also accounts of cannibalism, practiced by the convicts who reached the ultimate level of degradation, madness and despair. But those were tales best left for camping: everyone gathered around a campfire at night listening to the narrator. It didn't matter if some of them had plot holes or made pretty clear that they had been invented on the spot just to frighten those who listened. It was exactly what they were looking for.

Giovanni realized he had ridden his train of thought for too long, letting the recorded footage play for several minutes. He rapidly went beck to the recording mode, but as soon as he tried to look for the newcomers in that tangle of human bodies, there was a beep from the Postman. He immediately turned to face the smaller screen and he saw the incoming message icon. With a suddenly heavier heart he rapidly clicked it and a short yet eloquent sentence appeared: *"All good with the first delivery, but watch the protocol."*

Giovanni instinctively smiled. It was a bitter smile, as if he was squeezing a slice of lemon with his teeth. *Watch the protocol…*

Those two sons of bitches, Scar and his comrade. They didn't pass on the chance to report his error to the higher ups. He bet they even made it worse than it actually was.

"Bastards…"

Well, it was too late. It wasn't a tragedy after all. It was his first delivery and surely enough they would turn a blind eye. Or should he expect a Warning? No, no… the tone of the message didn't look menacing. He had to answer though. Opening a message immediately signalled its reception, so he couldn't avoid it.

"*I thank you",* he wrote "*And humbly apologise for the hitch in the execution of the procedure. It won't happen again.*"

He read it from the top, satisfied by the humble yet martial tone he had managed to convey. Then, to have a bit of fun, he added: "*And tell those two idiots that if they show their faces around here I'll personally kick their asses into the Tank.*" He remained still for several moments, a weird smile on his lips, his finger over the ENTER button. He tried to imagine what would happen if the actually lowered his fingertip of about one centimeter and pressed. He had sent three people to hell by pressing a button just a few minutes earlier. With that same gesture he could end up destroying his dreams, hopes, maybe even his own life. Crazy. Just by pressing a button…

He carefully cancelled that last sentence and sent his answer.

He sat back on the armchair and held his hands to his chest looking at the big screen he had personally re-named *the Well.* There, in that moldy circular mess, tens and tens of bodies were crawling, sliding on top of each other, pushing and kicking to remain on the surface just to once meow fill their lungs with hot, stinking air.

* * *

The other two deliveries went smoothly, or almost. Giovanni expected to see the same EGs as that morning, but it wasn't so. There were different Guards each time, at least in that same day. They surely had their own reasons. It was better that way.

At 1:30 P.M. – exactly as written in the fax, not late by a single minute – three north-african rapists, at 6:00 P.M two slavs who assaulted and old couple to rob them and a revolutionary. Giovanni, who had no right to ask the EGs for further explanations regarding the crimes committed by the convicts and had to make do with what was written in the communications he received, wasn't sure about the true nature of what the last convict had done to be brought to him. The label of *revolutionary* implied a large variety of actions, more or less glaring, taken against the NMO.

He had read something about that too, of course: the choices and decision of the regime were written on the pages of recent history, not just on newspapers. A revolutionary was someone who theorized returning to democratic social structures, who printed clandestine propaganda, who made satire… and who planted bombs.

While cherishing the other guests' exclusion from society, Giovanni didn't get any satisfaction from seeing the *revolutionary* (so-called Ettore Assonitis, same age as him) approach the Shutter with the other two convicts. And when the young man passed by him – gaunt and with a bruised face – the Keeper surely didn't expect him to talk.

"I just threw… some fliers… in the university."

He said so in a low voice, trembling and drowsy from the sedatives. Giovanni opened his mouth, but didn't reply. He knew he was not allowed to. But he was left breathless.

He completed the procedure under the EGs watchful eyes while telling himself that he was simply an arm to the NMO. Not a heart, not a brain. Just an arm.

* * *

Neither that second evening did he eat much. A lot had happened in a single day. He would get used to it. Some days would be better, others worse. He just needed to learn the ropes, then everything would ho smoothly. *A year is long,* he told himself. *But two days have already come and gone.*

6 – Nocturnal Accidents

The first very unsettling episode happened on January 23rd, in the dead of night, when Giovanni could finally tell he had integrated with the Tank's routine at a psychological level.

He was woken up by someone knocking at the door.

Since the year had began everything was going according to plan. The white truck with a red tetragram on the sides, the one that brought provisions, punctually came twice a week, on Tuesdays and on Fridays. In the late morning Giovanni would put the grey styrofoam bin full of left-overs and junk in the elevator, then get the one containing fresh food. Of course, he couldn't choose the menu, but the food and drinks the NMO sent him were reasonably varied and of good quality.

The ironing and laundry service, which conveniently came on the same two days as the provisions, but in the early afternoon, was impeccable too. There was another truck (with a blue tetragram) and, without any need for interpersonal communication, the dirty sheets and clothes were put in a basket and substituted by those withdrawn and cleaned the previous time.

The average number of delivered convicts was between five and seven a day. He watched any possible kind of criminal walk into the Shutter. There were foreigners and fellow countrymen alike: thieves, murderers, crooks, pimps, drug-dealers, robbers, religious integralists, mafia thugs, rapists, pedophiles… beasts only fit for slaughter. Tumors to be removed. He hadn't met any politicians yet, but there was a very simple reason for that: those who had perpetrated the ruse known as the Fourth Republic were already out of business; many once and for all, having probably inaugurated Tank 1 years earlier. Members of Mafia groups, families and similar historical and social aberrations had grown rare; the army had conducted carried out a great number of incursions in the so called *hot zones* of organised crime and cleaned them up using strong-arm tactics (which to be fair were the only effective ones).

There were also a lot of foreigners, but in a lower percentage that before. When the NMO substituted the former government, one of its first military-political measures was to gather and deport all clandestine immigrants, from nomads to false refugees; predictably, many had managed to get back in the country, but they had been caught.

There were usually two Escort Guards, but in case of single deliveries one was sufficient. Some days earlier Scar had come to the Tank, but there was no more than an impersonal exchange of

formulae between Giovanni and him. The Keeper's initial distaste in his regards was gone, he felt he had finally managed to fit in the context and could confidently manage both his job and relationships with other people. Each to its place and things would go smoothly.

He also had some bad dreams during the first nights. Nothing major. He kept seeing the Well. Predictable. The psychologist had warned him.

"You could have nightmares, especially during the first few weeks", he had told him. "Don't worry, it's normal. Life in the Tank isn't easy as it might seem. There's a lot of people in there, it's true. But you are alone. Are you aware of that?"

Giovanni had answered with confidence, smiling widely. To tell the truth, he was never one-hundred percent sure of the things he said during the interviews. He wasn't sure he had been completely honest. He could doubtlessly say – but only yo himself – that he had more than once lied about his character and personality in order to be seen as the ideal candidate. Did it mean he had cheated? Maybe, maybe not. No doubt the others had done the same. The difference was he had succeeded. He felt he had had enough common sense and intuition in order to understand what he was expected to answer during tests; thus he managed to conform. Maybe that guy Alex, the one who came second, was more fit for the job, but he was the one who took it, and that was it.

The reasons why he wanted that job so much were essentially two. The first was ideological. The NMO always fascinated him. He agreed with it on every topic: politics, military, law, social welfare. He remembered that when he was a kid his home had been robbed by gypsies and since then, maybe, a feeling of rebellion towards some social categories had started to grow; a feeling that had grown to include all those people who could be seen as cancers hanging from an otherwise healthy tissue. The second reason was a lot more practical, he had to admit it. At the end of his year of service he would receive an monetary compensation that would allow him to realize one of his dreams: a long vacation somewhere in the Pacific or the Atlantic. An island, for example. He couldn't say he knew them, but the Bahamas had a good ring to them… it was about the money. He was doing it for that, too.

* * *

Yeah, he had had nightmares. Considering what he had to see every single day, there was nothing to be surprised of. He lived surrounded by death, fear and suffering. The Tank itself was drenched

in them. They seeped from the walls, saturated the very air he breathed. Moreover, it wouldn't be long before the first Cleansing of the year. Giovanni thought it would test him further and give his subconscious new tools to have fun creating new, more unpleasant dreams.

But the nightmare he had that night was particularly vivid. And the impression that it wasn't completely a nightmare wouldn't leave before a long time.

Nothing out of the ordinary had happened that day. Two triple deliveries, the usual formalities, some exercise, a light meal, a documentary on african animals on Tv. He read a few pages from a book by Verne, then he fell asleep. In the dead of night, from the unaccessible caves of his mind, somebody…

…starts crawling from dark depths ridden with corpses and agonizing men. He digs a way up moving limbs, pulling ragged clothes, biting when necessary, and kicking. A constant rattle comes in and out his searing throat, becoming a beastly baying resounding in the curved walls of steel and concrete.

The man keeps on climbing without rest, it is Giovanni and a stranger at the same time. In the dream, sounds and smells are as real as the phosphorescent darkness stagnantly pulsating in the damp gaps between the seemingly endless bodies. Many of them are crawling too, their hands tied behind their backs and their mouths dirty with blood, telling stories of atrocious appetites. The man climbing upwards – Giovanni – uses his teeth too, but not to feed. He does so to make the others get out of his way, let him pass and reach the superficial layer of bodies, fill his lungs with the blessed air above them, see the light.

The weight on him gets less and less oppressing the more he advances, a centimeter at a time. There are groans, screams and cries everywhere. The smell is unbearable. It gets under the skin, closing the pores. Blood, sweat, urine, feces…

And he is finally out! *Shaking off the hands trying to grab his legs and clothes to pull him back in that meat vortex, the man starts walking on that shaking, growling mass. He steppes on faces, making black spurts come out of crushed cartilage, breaks bones and joints among creaking sounds and ape-like screams. From a seemingly unreachable height a yellow, dust-particle light pours on him in gashes that have the same rhythm as his heartbeat. Giovanni knows that light comes from from the glass walls of the Shutter, like he knows that is the man's goal,* his *goal.*

He walks to the closest wall and puts his hands on it. The concrete is cold and rough on his wounded palms. An intense, burning, yet not unpleasant feeling runs through his whole body. It is like an unknown energy invigorating him. He feels reborn. *He plunges his nails in the wall, penetrating it like claws, and starts climbing like a monstrous spiders,*

leaving behind the deadly miasma that still claims him. Until he reaches the Shutter. There he bends at unnatural angles, jumps and grips the Suffering, inserting bony but tough fingers between the shutters… and when they open to let him in, an asthmatic breath comes out of his lungs, slimily echoing on the cabin's walls. All he has to do is reach out with his arm and push, and with a dark droning the first sliding door welcomes him with a whisper. Come, you have reached the Ring… *Giovanni is not that man anymore. He is lying on his bed and when he hears three loud knocks on the flat's door he springs up. He exits the room, his legs shaking, the sole of his feet snapping on the ice-cold floor. He reaches the door and cautiously puts an ear on the surface of fake wood. He listens and listens… on the other side he can hear a tired, laboured breath. It belongs to somebody who went a long way reach him. And nothing can make him go away.*

Giovanni says "Who's there?"

And a voice – trembling, yet menacing – answers: "I just wanted to throw some fliers."

* * *

In that moment Giovanni woke up for real.

His first feeling was to be rolled up in square meters of crawling skin. He had his knees bent against chest in a fetal position, like when he was a kid and had a bad dream. His heart as beating like crazy and drool came out of his mouth as he raised his head. His conscience – at least the part that managed to wake up in his brain – told him to calm down. It was a nightmare, nothing more. And if it wasn't for the fact that he could still hear the knocking echoing in his ears he probably would. The impression that someone had really knocked, and loudly, stuck to his brain, and he would never be able to go back to sleep without checking first.

He reached out to turn on the screen of the digital alarm clock on the bedside table. He felt he had dreamt for hours, but only eleven minutes after midnight had passed. He reluctantly pulled the sheets aside, sat on his bed and looked for his loafers with his feet (he had woken up just a few minutes earlier, in his dream, and he remembered how cold the floor was).

A pale ray of yellow and grey light came into the room through the window – which was never dark, not even at night – filtering from behind milky white clouds that foreshadowed snowing, and the floodlights of the Camp's sentinels. Being on the north-western side of the building, the bedroom was never flooded with too much sunlight and the morning sun came as a discreet, pink halo.

But the dawn was still far away. And so was sleep. His eyes had

already adapted to the dim light and trying not to make any noise – even if there was nobody there – he got out of his room, whose door he usually left open, and for a few moments he remained still in front of the reinforced entrance.

His eyes were fixed on the tips his loafers, but his ears tried to scan the almost complete silence where the low, continuos buzzing of the fridge was the only thing he could hear.

He thought about asking: “Who’s there?” But he didn’t know how he would react if the same answer he heard in his dream would come from the other side.

He still had to go out and check. It was his duty. Even if he wouldn’t probably report that episode. It was something personal after all. He had a nightmare and the acoustic illusion had continued once awake.

Everything in the Control was calm and still, apart from the resell larvae in the Well. There, inside the big screen, day and night had no meaning. Time didn’t exist for the Tank’s convicts. Dawn, midday, dusk, midnight… a quick look was enough to confirm that everything was ok. What was he expecting, to find the Tank empty? And maybe that all those who had swarmed the Ring were waiting for him to come out? The mere thought made him smile, but he felt hundreds of tiny pinheads in the back of his head.

Without turning the big neon lamp on – he could very well see in the mould-colored light coming from the screen – he grabbed the 9 mm gun from the third drawer and went back to the entrance door.

The key, and the whole set, was in the lock, like every other night. Giovanni hesitated for a few more seconds, realizing he was rhythmically folding and extending his toes. He happened to unawarely do so every time he was in a stressful situation. He remembered noticing himself doing it more than once during the tests. He stopped immediately, irritated by the thought of being distressed by a stupid dream.

He turned the key with intentional vigor, causing a sudden clatter that would surely scare whoever was out there to ambush him.

Ambush me? Night and solitude really stress nerves out…

He opened the door aiming his gun in front of him, rapidly checking both ways. His pupils shrunk immediately, hit by the constant light of the long, circular corridor. It was a cold light, like those in hospitals.

Nobody was there, of course.

Neither on the left, nor on the right. Nobody. The elevator was silent. So was the Shutter’s door. Something in his chest told him he could speak without being afraid of any surprises.

“Is there anybody there?”

His words flew along the ring, split up and probably met on the other side, on the dark side of the moon. It was obvious that if someone had been actually there, he would never answer. It was a truth known by any sentinel: if it doesn't answer, it doesn't mean it's not there. He did the only think left to do.

He decided to go right, keeping to the Ring's longest wall. The rubber soles of his loafers whistled weakly against the linoleum floor. He didn't try to be more stealthy; he made clear he was there. The neon's light came down intermittently, with a darker cone every two steps between one lamp and the other. He stubbornly blocked himself from thinking, knowing that letting his fantasy run would be a big mistake. The whole thing whose more emotionally challenging that he had imagined. Maybe he did have to report the episode. All in all, the fact of hearing or believing to have heard a noise in the dead of night and reacting as expecting from him would do him honour. He wouldn't mention the dream.

He finally reached the Escape (he immediately verified if it was locked) and the Porthole, diametrically opposite to his flat. As soon as he realized it, a slimy shadow crawling up his spinal cord made him shiver. The thought penetrated his brain like a corkscrew.

The flat… he had left it *wide open.*

He didn't need to panic, though. He kept on walking along the Ring, now walking faster, his weapon aiming forward should he see the intruder beyond the turn, in the heart of the Dark Side.

He reached the lift, then the reinforced door. It was open, of course. He cursed himself through his teeth for being so clumsy, deciding that would he really report the episode – and he wasn't so sure about that anymore – he would also leave that detail out.

He entered with a dash, turning all the lights on. There was nobody in the Control. Nor in the kitchen and the bedroom. He looked in the toilet too, to be sure. After finishing that quick inspection he realized he was holding his breath since the moment he came in, so he let out an ominous sigh that flew in the silence. He felt quite ridiculous now. Where had all his cockiness gone? The tough-guy act he put on to be selected? If Stevanich could see him, he would probably call him to his office for another face-to-face. And a lot less pleasant than the previous one.

So, he told himself, *you might as well go all the way: look under the bed. It is the favorite hiding place of any nocturnal threat, isn't it?*

He knelt with a grin and, using his Beretta to move away the sheets, which almost touched the floor, he went on one elbow and lowered his head…

The sudden buzz of the Spy almost made him scream.

Teeth clenched, his heart pounding against his rips, he ran

towards the still open door (over which the red light shone) and almost fell. One of his loafers slipped away from his foot and and into the air, but he didn't care. The noise of the lift's mechanism stopped with the metallic thud that signalled the cabin's arrival to the ground floor. But… how could he not hear any noises earlier? There *had* to be some. Had an intruder come up while he was sleeping. the acoustic signal of the Spy should have woken him up. Or maybe not…

A scarlet flash lightened up a dark corner of his memory. There had been a moment in his nightmare… yes, when the Shutter's door had opened to let that… that *thing*… reach the Ring. It did so with a deep, loud buzzing sound. Yes, he remembered now. *It was the sound made by the Spy!*

He rushed to the bedroom again, barely noticing the difference in temperature being bare-footed. He opened the window and leant his head into the chill of the night. The vertigo's icy fingers caressed his forehead, but he meant to endure it, hoping to catch a glimpse of movement somewhere.

It was all useless. Down there, everything was coated in darkness. The moon, which was on the back side of the Tank, projected a vast lead-coloured shadow on the front, hiding the lift's entrance from view. Anyone who exited it could easily see him at the window and cunningly crawl along the building's circumference to disappear unseen.

He retreated and closed the window, cutting out the cold bite of the night's wind. There some lights in the distance, where all the activities of Camp 9 were organised and directed. Maybe in that same moment somebody was already preparing the faxes he would receive the following day. Or – why not? – he was looking towards the Tank, asking himself why was the Keeper still keeping the lights on…

There also had to be many *prisoners*, convicts who were soon to be delivered, locked up in some cell. He could bet they had it way, way worse than him. The night before entering hell was a terrible one.

He locked the reinforced door, drank the orange juice left in the fridge, then turned off the apartment lights one by one.

Without even giving one last glance to the Well he sat on the edge of his bed, his head between his hands. Maybe he would manage to think about the whole episode with a clearer mind the following day. He knew how the human mind could glue together the pieces of a particular event, however problematic or lacking, in order to make it seamlessly fit in the ordinary. Did he really hear someone knocking at the door or did he just catch the echoes of a dream upon waking up? And if he chose to believe he had heard something, was it the knocking or the clang of the lift reaching the floor? That last hypothesis had to be discarded as it created more than one

complication. He could just convince himself that what he had heard was not the sound of the descending car. Between the emotional stress and the blood pumping in his head, even a voltage drop of the fridge or the kitchen could be mistaken for…

"Oh, damn it all!"

He laid on the bed, hands crossed under his head. The ceiling was a dark and magical gulf where his dreams, which were born on the center of his forehead to drip through his brain and be absorbed, already forgotten, on the pillow, took form. Only one detail ruined that enchanted landscape: an indistinct shadow on the corners of his mind. The impression he missed something, like a splinter from a shattered mirror. Something he saw, maybe? That he had register somewhere in his brain, but then was buried in the depth of his head…

But he had time to think it over. (*A splinter*). If someone had really been there, he was gone now. (*Splinters everywhere. For how many you may pick up, one is always missing. A triangle.)* And if he had just made everything up, all the better. (*Under a piece of furniture. A white triangle. Under the bed.)* It was time to stop thinking. (*Under the bed)*. He had to worry about the sun…

He fell asleep after three minutes and nothing more happened that night.

7 – An Unexpected Encounter

All of the night's anguish disappeared under the morning light, as could be predicted.

Giovanni undertook his daily activities in good spirits. First a glance to the Well, then one to the fax machine (there would be two deliveries that day: a double one in the morning and a triple one in the afternoon). For breakfast he had yogurt, biscuits and fruit juice, all while watching the news. They were reassuring as always. Crime rate dropping, safe justice, someone received an award, another one was appointed to some public position… with NMO in power, it was unlikely for things to go badly. Of course the fact that the whole official news system in the country was run by the New Order could make people doubt that everything was as good as they were told; but if some things were still to be fixed – and to think they weren't would be foolish and naive – Giovanni couldn't help but admire the NMO for the revolution for which it acted both as promoter and perpetrator.

After watching TV he did some push-ups and weight lifting, just to maintain his muscle tone. He used to exercise everyday before the Tank, during that part of his life he already considered a closed chapter, waiting for things to change, in any way, but a definitive one. The one-room apartment he lived in during his studies, where he had decided to stay even after graduating from university, seemed to belong to a faraway place. As if he was looking back to the road he had walked through an inverted scope. He had to thank the NMO for that. That was the true change, for him and everyone else.

He hadn't forgotten the events of the previous night, of course. They kept interfering with his thoughts like low radio frequencies disrupting the main channel. But he had also predicted what his mind managed to do while he was sleeping: it had put the pieces together like a puzzle, and even if some weren't easy to place, a small push had been enough. The result was all in all acceptable. Was there anything missing? Maybe. There was something still hanging from the edge of his memory, refusing to come back. It didn't matter. It probably wasn't anything important.

* * *

That morning's delivery (9:15, a mob leader and an occultist) brought in a small surprise.

He knew the first EG, he had already been there four or five tines. Giovanni divided the EGs in terms of *first* and *second* taking from their

position in the line of convicts. He still didn't quite get whether there was a precise distinction or if their position was the result of random movements. However things really were, the first EG was the one he called Mole because of the particularly large one on one side of his neck. Other guards he knew included Wrinkle, Bags, and even Scalp, a guy with a receding hairline. But the second EG…

He had already seen him, but he was sure that was the first time he had ever escorted some convicts to the Tank. Slim, quite tall, buzz cut.

It was only when the new Guard looked back at him and raised his eyebrows in recognition that his identity came back to the Keeper's mind. He thought he only remembered his first name: Alex; but in that moment he could also remember his last name, Allevi. Alex Allevi, the guy who didn't become the Keeper for a handful of points. And now… now he was an EG. Well, good for him. Giovanni imagined the compensation at the end of the year of service in the Tank could come in handy to a lot of people. To all those who took part in the selections, to tell the truth. Each one of them had his own dreams, his own tropical island. He could suppose that Alex would be happy to clench his hands around his neck.

The delivery went smoothly. Giovanni found himself thinking he wouldn't be able to distinguish the mob leader from the would-be occultist. They were both balding, wrinkly and sordid-looking. Sure, the sedative played its part into making them look so dull, but Giovanni thought that people like those had been dead inside for a long time and the Tank was only logical conclusion to their pitiful journey. They went through the Suffering like big, shapeless lemming throwing themselves down a cliff.

When the Guards started walking back to the lift, Giovanni stood motionless and watched them, like he always did, waiting for the doors to close. He did not expect Alex to turn around – slightly, in order not to be noticed by the other EG – to blink his eye and rotating the index finger as to say *we'll talk later*. It was Giovanni's time to raise his eyebrows in surprise. He then frowned as to ask for an explanation that he knew he wouldn't get.

The two Guards disappeared in the cabin, which was as always flooded by a blue-yellowish light, and the lift went down yet again.

Once he closed his flat's door, Giovanni realized his muscles were still contracted in a puzzled mask and hurried to wash it away with cold water.

* * *

He thought about that unexpected encounter for a long time. Alex, the guy who ranked second, still managed to join the NMO's military force. And he worked there, at Camp 9. To be honest, he didn't know whether the EGs had a rotation schedule, periodic transfers or whatever, but he didn't care. But that gesture… a promise or a thread? Well, it wasn't necessarily one or the other. There were a lot of shades in between. It could also just mean *see ya*. Now that he thought about it, maybe Alex would be back that afternoon to deliver the new triplet of convicts.

* * *

It wasn't so.

At exactly 4:30 P.M. Scar and Mole arrived, escorting three black men (with a permit to sojourn, but not to deal coke). They had probably sedated them more heavily that usual since they walked dragging their bare feet on the linoleum floor and kept their head bowed despite their efforts to keep their eyes looking upwards. As a result their eyes were almost completely white because of the sclera, as if they just came out of a zombie movie. The Shutter swallowed them ravenously and the Suffering delivered the to the realm of shadows without regret.

* * *

After having supper (fish sticks and salad while watching the circus on the documentary channel) he decided to exhaust his body in order to avoid any bad encounters while sleeping. There was nothing better than a good run around the Ring maintaining an even pace.

The habit of using the Tank's circular corridor as a track to keep in shape was a recent one, taken after thinking over the matter of becoming overweight. He could presently say he was proud of his physical shape; but would he be so at the end of the year? The two small dumbbells were certainly helpful, but not like a good run, through which he could train a wider range of muscles. The Ring wasn't the best track, but it was something.

So he had started to regularly exercise every time he could. He had started with twenty laps, then he gradually increased them, always adapting the duration of his training to his will and tiredness, without any specific goal. Moreover, he noticed that the linoleum floor was more faded near the outer wall. His predecessor had probably head the same idea. Maybe even the ones before him.

Other than benefitting him through by helping him burn calories, running around the Ring also helped him clear his head of the accumulating cobwebs.

It was a fortifying, regenerating experience. He could almost feel the grains of sand and dust falling of his mind, lightening him with every step he took. *Thump, thump, thump…* the walls of the Ring rapidly slipped away from the corners of his eyes (he instinctively always run counterclockwise), and he always needed to be concentrated to keep track of the laps. He normally used the Porthole opposite to the Escape as a point of reference and every time he reached it he would say a number out lout. Porthole… lift… flat… Shutter… Porthole again… "One!"

Thump, thump.

Lift… apartment… he wondered if they could hear him down there in the dark.

Thump, thump, thump.

Porthole… "Seven!"

Lift… Porthole

"Thirty!"

Shutter… they heard him, in silence, knowing it was him? No, it was impossible… they couldn't hear anything but the rattles, the cursing, the screams filling that fetid, cylindrical bedlam.

Porthole… porthole… porthole…

One month has almost passed. Almost passed…

When he realized he had lost count of the laps and run out of energy he went back to his apartment, took a quick shower and got into bed.

"I can do it." Were the last words he said, mumbling, before falling asleep.

8 – Cleansing Day

In Camp 9 the Keeper would normally be notified of a delivery that same day. In case of a Cleansing, however, the notice would arrive two days earlier. And the fax informing him of the upcoming operation (there were usually four a year) came the last day of January.

We notice the est. Keeper of Tank 9 that the Cleansing operation will commence on February 2nd at 8:30 A.M., as per regulation etc, etch. Bureaucracy was one aspect of the old State that the NMO didn't eliminate. It was actually one of its fundamental principles. Where perfect organisation, efficiency and precision were needed there had to be am extremely meticulous apparatus. Empty spaces between one thing and the other in the established power had always constituted a threat, since they could be filled by anyone who felt like doing so, outside any form of control. So each initiative, regulation and operation was filed with a univocal code. The opposite concept – *ambiguous* – had the stench of anarchy all over.

That particular Cleansing, the first of the year, and also for Giovanni Corte, was the B9.22.49.C-164n.

It was a truly impersonal name for a mass slaughter.

The morning of February 2nd Giovanni saw the tanker truck come from afar, proving that the world outside the Camp still existed. Because of the distance he could only barely follow its slowing down to stop at the gates. They were conducting all the necessary inspections, from identifying the driver the nature of the load. Everything was documented, of course. So Giovanni could see it go through, followed by a jeep. Time: 8:24. The precision with which the NMO could manage its immense gears was incredible.

It had finally snowed that night, so Camp 9 was pretty different from usual, and it was a pleasure to look at it. From the widespread whiteness that had swallowed the ground trellises, towers, cottages with shining roofs, wire fences and sporadic, intelligible black spots emerged. Giovanni's calm breathing condensed on the window, creating opaque auras over portions of the landscape. He had always like snow, since he was a kid. Like all children. And even if now he had to do something there was anything but a game, somewhere, between his heart and stomach, he could almost feel that hint of excitement that accompanied him through so many moments during his childhood.

The tanker truck and the military keep were approaching the Tank on the invisible rails of a barely distinguishable path, drawing black trails on the previously intact snow.

But he… had to *hurry*. He was standing there like a kid contemplating the beauty of nature, when he had to fill some modules and supervise the operation.

He rushed to the elevator – making sure he closed the apartment door – and found himself outside exactly when the big vehicle stopped at a short distance from the Gate of Cleansing, which was protected by the round wicket gate similar to that of a submarine or an old-fashioned safe. His punctuality – fortuitous, but who could prove that? – made him feel proudly worthy of the NMO's perfect gear. The crisp air welcomed him with an electrifying embrace and Giovanni only barely noticed that it was the first time he set foot outside the Tank since he had arrived.

In the meanwhile the truck's driver, a podgy, moustached man in a blue jumpsuit, had jumped down the cabin leaving the engine on. One of the two soldiers who had followed him on the jeep, which was now parked several meters away with its engine off, one remained at the wheel and the other was approaching with some clipboards and paper sheets in his hands. The rhythmic, crunching sound of the fresh snow followed his every step.

Giovanni joined them: a martial salute for the official – maybe one of those who had escorted him on the first day? He hadn't got a good memory for faces, so he couldn't be sure – and a firm hand shake for the moustached man.

Then, without fussing, the latter took a tubular key out of his pocket and approached the Gate. He messed about for a few seconds muttering some insults at the snow and the ice-cold steel. He took out a pair of thick yellow gloves from the back pocket of his jumpsuit, wore them, and firmly grabbed the round handle.

"Keeper Corte?"

Giovanni, who was vacantly watching the driver's actions, was shaken awake by the soldier's stern voice. No, he wasn't one of those who escorted him. And he was higher in rank. But maybe, after being in the NMO for some time, everyone began to look alike in the bearing, voice, and even the hauteur. But the small, flashy tetragrams on his uniform spoke clearly: he was a lieutenant. He had to avoid answering arrogantly.

The officer was handing him a clipboard with a ballpoint pen hanging from a chain attached to it. He was also staring at him intensely, with grey eyes that seemed to evaluate and doubt his competence.

Giovanni quickly grabbed it, muttering: "I apologise…"

In the meanwhile the truck driver was bustling about in his field of view, going to the back of his vehicle and then coming back with a long tube a few inches in diameter. It looked like a cobalt blue

anaconda sneaking in the the snow following its prey. Giovanni avoided looking at it and concentrated on the document that was given to him.

So: Cleansing Bill B9.22.49.C-165n. Date, hour, technical info of the vehicle, the diver's personal details and Cleansing Operator, liters…

All that whiteness around him fuzzed him, making his eyes wet with tears. When he rushed outside he had forgotten to wear gloves or an adequate hat. The cold air was making his fingers go numb and his nose run. He quickly cleaned his nostrils with the back of his hands and coughed, then he sluggishly grabbed the pen and put it on the line that was waiting for him to sign.

"What are you doing, Keeper?"

The officer again, with the same tone of a indignant teacher scolding a pupil who had just written some mistake on the blackboard.

He had to swallow before he could answer. "I'm… I'm signing."

"Are you aware that signing the paper means to validate what is written on that document?"

"Of course, sir."

The officer stared at him in silence, as if he was waiting for Giovanni to come to a conclusion on his own. Then, after deciding that the clear lack of experience could at least grant him a bit of indulgence, he added: "How many liters can the truck contain?"

Giovanni glanced at the bill, even if he remembered the correct answer. "Five thousands."

"And how many have been poured into the Tank?"

Giovanni couldn't avoid to turn his head towards the driver, who was fixing one end of the hose to the nozzle, usually protected by the now open round Gate, using a monkey wrench. And he had the answer, clear and shamefully obvious, on the tip of his tongue.

"Still none, sir."

The officer joined his hands behind his back while a semblance of satisfaction appeared on the edges of his mouth. He would have been a perfect teacher. The kind students hate from the first to the last day of school.

"I will sign only when the procedure is complete, sir."

Giovanni wasn't cold anymore. He felt an unpleasant wave of heat climbing up his neck, making his face go red to match the colour of his ears.

The soldier didn't add anything else and set the matter aside, then he began follow the operator's maneuvers with ostentation.

Giovanni couldn't do but imitate him, still brooding on his behaviour. He didn't make any mistake after all, did he? He was about

to, yes, but he didn't. Could he be blamed for his intentions?

Now that the anaconda-hose had firmly bitten the nozzle, the operator had disappeared behind the vehicle again. Mechanical noises came from his position, until the body of the big rubber reptile (which had an internal steel-thread cladding) started flexing and vibrating while vitriol started flowing inside it copiously.

The operator appeared again, taking off his gloves and putting them back in the big back pocket he had on his right buttock; he brought himself to one side of Giovanni and the officer, then took a small red and green packet out of the front pocket on his chest. "Cigarette?" He asked.

The soldier shook his head.

Giovanni smiled at him. "No, thanks. I don't smoke."

The man then decided not to smoke himself and laid a hand on the side of the truck. "Is this your first Cleansing, son?"

A rhetorical question, just to start a conversation. Giovanni couldn't even give a vague answer, as the officer immediately gave him an eloquent look. The protocol didn't allow futile chats during a procedure. It actually forbade them. The couldn't do anything but shut his mouth and go back to staring at the Tank.

The podgy Cleansing Operator looked up to the sky for a moment. He had clearly already been deterred from starting pointless conversation many times before; so he leant more comfortably against the truck using a shoulder, arms crossed and a bored expression, and began to wait for the five thousand liters of acid to be injected in the Tank's side.

* * *

It took less than ten minutes. Giovanni spent that time guessing what was happening in there.

The Tank's bottom wasn't made of a compact flooring nor dirt. There was a grating, a huge round grating on which the first guests fell when the Tank was empty: the first layer, which became the deepest one in just a few weeks, the one whence no voices or breathing came. Under the grate – which was about one meter above the soil – there an open space about half a meter tall, called Drainage Area, under which there were simply earth and rocks, and then the foundations.

The Gate of Cleansing was about one meter above the ground and was connected to a steel tube running through the whole circumference of the structure, inside the concrete. *Cleansing Crown*, the manual called it. It had a great number of holes, about as large as

common rings, communicating with the inside of the Tank, on the lower layers of the mass of bodies. When hundreds, thousands of liters of sulphuric acid were injected inside it, the last part of the detention and punishment process, named *Elimination*, finally took place.

Arrest, Process, Conviction, Confinement, Unloading, Elimination: the six phases of the NMO's penal system. The last one, the one closing the circle, was undoubtedly the most cruel; even if, for logistic and security reasons, there was no possibility of watching it, one couldn't help but imagine what was happening.

Camp 9 was silent, immersed in an almost surreal tranquillity. The rumbling of the engine with the gearbox in neutral was part of that silence now, to which the gurgles and the swishes of the acid inside the hose acted as a counterpoint.

No sound came from inside the Tank, of course. And yet that immense dark lair, whose existence was only conceivable in terms of spatial and temporal coexistence with the candor and quietness of the world surround Giovanni, was probably filled with screams, cries and laments. Not from those who were flooded by the corrosive jets, no. Death had already come for them, granting them grace. Nobody could still be alive where the acid was injected; unless, because of some unpredictable movement of the human mass, somebody who had recently been unloaded was pulled or pushed towards the bottom of that swamp, finding themselves, so to speak, in the wrong place at the wrong time. At that point all that they could do was to welcome like a blessing the deathly touch that would deliver them turning them to nothing.

The corpses dissolved in what the manual defined *Draining Division Zone* (acrostic on which some wiseass had invented the name *Demographic Drop Zone*), poured in the Drainage Area underneath and from there on it was plausible that they were just lost forever, absorbed by the soils. Within a certain range around the Tank, the underground had to be soaked with them.

* * *

A loud metallic noise informed them that the truck's distribution valve had closed.

The Operator quickly moved to unplug the hose from the nozzle and close the wicket gate. Giovanni had to make an effort to stop fantasizing about the dark lair where tenths and tenths of corpses were still silently melting, and looked at the official. In turn, the soldier stared at the clipboard Keeper Corte had in his hands: was is a tremor making it vibrate? Probably. It was because of the cold, no

doubt. What else could it be?

Giovanni, who was still keeping hold of the pen, quickly signed at the bottom of the Cleansing Bill. He then gave the clipboard to the lieutenant who, without a word, ripped the carbon copy and handed it to him so that it could be filed in the Tank-related documents. In the meanwhile the anaconda was rolling back to its nest in the back of the tank truck.

"Do you know what to do now?"

Giovanni hoped not to be wrong. "Of course, sir. Open the Drainage Openings for at least an hour."

A laconic "Good work, Keeper" was all the officer answered him. Maybe he had tried to trick him again and had no success. Or maybe not. Maybe it was his way to tell him *you're good*. Giovanni was growing excessively defensive attitude towards the NCOs.

* * *

Alone again, closed up in lift's cabin, he let out a long sigh studying the puddle of dirty snow that was expanding under his feet. With his back leant against a wall he let the vibrations penetrate in his bones like an invigorating massage. He caught mid-air, with a quick movement, the bill that was slipping through his fingers, risking to become an intelligible scrap of paper. In case of an inspection he would be accountable for his negligence. Sure, that was just a copy. The original would be stored in the Camp's central archives. But that was *his* copy, the one that had been given to him. He was accountable, like for everything else. He thanked the heavens for his quick reflexes despite the physical and mental torpor.

He was right to think that the first Cleansing would unnerve him. Not for the procedures themselves – which had been carried out as expected, apart from the hitch of him almost signing too early – but for the images that got into his head and, sooner or later, would undoubtedly come to him in his dreams.

* * *

The first thing he did after going back to his apartment and filing the copy of the Bill in the appropriate binder was to activate the Gates' commands from the console in the Control. It was the first time he really did so, but it was a very easy procedure. Two simple levers under the DO label had to be lowered. *Cla-clack*, almost at the same time. And two small red lights informed him that everything was

going as expected.

On the roof of the tank two large horizontal panels in reinforced fiberglass were being lifted by hydraulic pistons. Their task was to avoid saturation from the gasses produced by the acid's corrosive action in order not to make the convicts die too soon and avoid any infiltrations in the Ring at the next Unloading. The Shutter's door were hermetic, but as an additional security measure there would be no deliveries in Cleansing days until the late afternoon.

There had to be many inches of snow on the roof; but the engines activating the GOs were calibrated to face natura obstacles. The Openings would stay open for at least one hour: the estimated time for the miasma to disperse. It was the Keeper's task to close them and write everything down on the Register.

After being sure of zealously complying to his duty Giovanni stooped to look at the Well. He squinted to see better.

The bodies belonging to the most superficial layer seemed a lot smaller, like worms plunged in their putrid phosphorescence. It was the effect produced by the lowering of the level. The distance between them and the camera had increased, since many had been – to say it in lingo – *drained*. Giovanni felt his stomach twitch thinking about the Draining Division Zone, the shapes that the corpses must have taken down there…

The convicts that hadn't been reached by the acid were thrashing more vehemently than usual because of the panic caused by the inexorable descent. There was also the devastating effect of the vapor emitted by the corrosion of flesh and bone.

The Openings undoubtedly helped make it vanish, but in the meanwhile the lungs of everyone that was still alive were filled with gas and it surely wasn't pleasant. Giovanni wondered what they could vomit, having nothing in their stomachs… probably even their their screams were distorted, their throats filled with natural and chemical gasses produced by the Elimination process.

Driven by a sudden, morbid curiosity, Giovanni slowly reached out for the green button labeled AUDIO CHANNEL. He had never done that before, in that month or so he had been there. Nor had he ever wanted to. But in that moment – slave to emotions he had never felt before, his brain trapped in barbed wire, his whole nervous system flowing with an undefinable aggressiveness and unjustified remorse – he thought that hearing the screams and howls and roars at high volume would be helpful in a way he couldn't explain. Unable to scream himself, maybe satisfying that perverse need could be a way of venting.

But his intentions remained such. A sudden *beep* forced him to come out that dangerous mood, and a message appeared on the

Postman's screen. "*The first Cleansing went ok. No confidence to civilian operators.*"

Before he could even think about an answer Giovanni noticed there was a fax waiting for him. He took it and read it impatiently. Two triple deliveries, that afternoon. Good, he had all the time in the world to calm down. So, who was it this time? Thieves, murderers, children prostitution panders. *Worms*. Worms even before becoming so inside the Tank. It was a pity they wouldn't be alive to see the joy of the next Cleansing.

He had to dedicate some time to lifting weights. It did him good. It calmed his nerves and built his muscles. He would also run later. But first he had to answer to that message, because if he didn't somebody could think he did not take their approval and advice into consideration. He didn't want to give such an impression, of course not.

He stared at the agony inside the Well for a few more seconds. Then he turned his gaze back to the internal communication screen. There was nothing about him almost signing the Bill at the wrong time. It was for the better. Had there been anything about it he would probably really scream. Just to relieve the tension in his chest.

After a short reflection he decided that a laconic "*Thank you*" was enough.

9 – The White Triangle

His memory gave him a sudden gift during the third week of February.

He had had two triple deliveries in the morning. And a single one awaited him at 5:00 P.M.. He never understood the process behind such unbalanced subdivisions in the day. These matters were tied to the NMO's judiciary system and he, as a civilian, had no right to know anything. Unless, at the end of the year, he would confirm his presence as a soldier; in that case he would gain access to a good part of the notions that were unknown to him. But – unless he changed his mind in the meantime – he wasn't keen on doing so. He was proud to give his contribution to the Order, but once he put his hands on the compensation… well, his expectancies for the future were way different. There was the tropical island. The rest would come naturally.

He didn't feel like reading, so he had sat in front of the TV watching a series he didn't know. It wasn't much, but it managed to make him smile from time to time. It was not small feat, inside the Tank. There was a fat, black actor shouting at the maid, accusing her of not cleaning well enough. The girl was uselessly trying to defend herself, but the man, in order to demonstrate her how dusty the room still was, he grabbed the side of the bed and lifted it with so much force that he turned it over completely. But neither the fact that underneath it was his wife hugging another man nor everything that follow that discovery (together with lots of pre-recorder laughter) could breach into Giovanni's subconscious, as he was suddenly struck by an haunch. No, it wasn't exactly a haunch. It was the classic light than one turns on after a long time trying to make head or tail of the situation while groping in the dark.

He hadn't thought about the night he had that awful nightmare in days, when he had believed someone to be in the corridor, someone that then ran away using the elevator, disappearing. Or at least he thought so.

The immediateness with which his might had brought him back to that episode, with the scene he saw on TV as its accomplice, convicted him otherwise.

The bed… actually, *under* the bed. Yes. Before running out of the apartment that night, lured by who knows what noises, he was about to check if somebody was hiding under it. He had moved away the covers with his gun, had knelt down, even if not completely… and he had seen *something*.

But of course, damn it!

He quickly got up from his chair, tapping the center of his forehead with a index finger, and went to his bedroom. With his heart pounding in his chest he went on all fours and lowered his head until he almost touched the floor with it.

And *there* it was. That white triangle…

It was a sheet of paper. No, some sheets, between the mattress and the frame. A corner hadn't been hidden properly, so it was hanging generating the white form that had stuck to his subconscious. HE didn't hesitate and extended his arm, grabbed the side of the sheets and started pulling cautiously. Nothing. He risked ripping them. So he stood back up and, keeping the mattress lifted with a shoulder, he managed to get hold of what somebody clearly wanted to hide.

"What the…?"

He sat on the edge of his bed and started examining that bundle of sheets on which the base had impressed an hexagonal pattern. Giovanni looked at the bottom of the last one, in case there was a signature or something. Nothing. The text looked incomplete, stuck halfway, as if the author had ben forced to stop writing and never got to it again.

There was no indication on the first page either. Yet reading the first few lines was enough to grasp the nature of that manuscript.

Today, March 29th, I heard voices coming from the Ring…

It was a diary, or at least a draft. Written on A4 sheets, certainly taken from the fax machine. By who? He had no doubts. The former Keeper.

"Oh my…"

The rules strictly forbade leaving any personal written traces of any kind. Even simple notes were considered a violation of the norms that regulated the role of Keeper. Nothing could be divulged. There was an oath. And yet… that's why those papers had been hidden. He had never lifted the mattress completely when changing the sheets. He could as well never be able to find it. Provided it was there to be found. Right. But he didn't see any other reason why his predecessor would leave a memoir in there. The risk of being found by someone else, and not the new Keeper, was high.

He casually leafed through the pages, catching another paragraph: *14 July – last night I heard a voice calling me. I woke up and saw a man inside the Control Room. His face was hidden by the shadows and he was pointing towards the screen. "There I am" he told, pointing his finger to a motionless body, on top of the mountain of pain. Then he added: "You threw me down there today." So I passed out. This morning I was in my bed. A dream? Or are there ghosts in this place?*

Giovanni stopped reading and blew through his teeth. So that's how things were. The former Keeper hadn't had it easy, it seemed.

But… why did he write those things? To warn him, maybe? It was a plausible idea. He imagined that at some point the idea of leaving a testimony must have popped to the man's head, worn down by solitude and tiredness as he was. Maybe as a self-defence mechanism. Giovanni knew a thing or two about psychology, and in some cases writing has a strong therapeutic value.

He read some more, browsing to read here and there: *noises in the walls… a red cat staring at me, resting at the foot of the bed… the convicts stare at me in the eyes and judge me, before entering the Shutter… time never passes in here, never… few months left, I must get to the end… everyone cries an calls my name… their eating each other alive, down there…*

Giovanni stood up with a sigh, shivering. That stuff had tired him. He already understood what it was and he already felt a mixture of nausea and compassion. The poor guy must have gone mad. At least he managed to complete his term, managing to vent out his tension through that delirious bundle of notes. Of course, he could only commiserate him, but…

He had done something that went against the NMO's regulations, and that made him look wretched. How could he then, pass the selections – tests that included scrupulous psychological examinations – and in just a few months be a victim to hallucinations and disorders worthy of a madman? Deep inside him, however, Giovanni recognized his strict attitude as a shield, probably induced by

(*Aren't you afraid?)*

some sort of fear. The fear of being conditioned, maybe. Hadn't he already experience many disquieting moments? Hadn't he already had the occasion to doubt his perception, his senses?

"Oh, to hell with it!"

He looked around him, instinctively trying to find a garbage can in which he could throw those papers. But then he realized he gave in to nervousness a bit too much and, with a long sigh, tried to calm down. He knew perfectly well that there were three cans in his flat: one in the kitchen, one in the bathroom, and one in the Control. But what he had in his hands wasn't something that could be thrown away just like that, to be carried away with the rest of the garbage. That stuff was *hot*. It was practically proof that his predecessor had acted against the New Order, however indulgent one could be because of his mental state. And he also had to consider that he had hidden those pages under the mattress. He didn't get rid of them, nor carry them with him. He *wanted* him to read.

A thought started burning a hole in his mind like hot wax. A new perspective jumped onto him like a tiger out of the jungle: *what if the*

NMO knew about that piece of writing and left it there on purpose, hidden, to test him? It was complex, but not impossible. It was the kind of initiative that fit in the New Order's modalities, for which loyalty was one of the first qualities that were required in its collaborators. He felt sweaty all of a sudden, but the temperature in the apartment hadn't changed. The feeling of being observed, controlled, monitored overwhelmed him like a torrid and oppressive gush. No, nobody was spying him. There were no cameras nor microphones… or were there?

He stared at that meagre diary trembling in his hands as if crossed by a low voltage current. His conscience was blocking him. Did he have to denounce his predecessor, dragging him into endless troubles, wherever he was? Or was it better to pretending not to have found the papers and put them back where he found them? He didn't want to read them again anyway. He knew himself. Something like that would be harmful to him, giving him nightmares, or just lead him in the dumps.

On the other hands, putting everything back and pretending nothing happened was equal to betraying the NMO, in a way. Was it better, then, to ruin a stranger's life? He would have to at least give back a part of the sum he had received, if hadn't already spent it all, to pay a fine. He tried walking in his shoes for a moment. He imagined himself under the sun, on his tropical island, while watching with perplexity two soldiers walk towards him on the beach, looking like someone who was bearing some bad, bad news…

He absent-mindedly – or maybe driven by an unconscious impulse – looked out of the window to maybe find advice in the white sky. And finding out that a truck was coming towards the Tank from the Confinement sector made him jump. He looked at the clock. *Two minutes to five.*

"Oh, shit…"

He had the presence of mind to lift the mattress and put those damn sheets of paper over the frame, trying to be as accurate as possible as for what their original position was, fighting against the nervousness of the moment. He then rushed to grab the clipboard with the fax and secure the holster of his Beretta to his belt, just in time for the signal to announce the lift's arrival.

While positioning himself in front of the Shutter, with his typical expression comprehending the three things that were expected of him (*readiness, security, efficiency*), he wondered if the tumult he felt between heart and lungs also showed in his eyes.

The cabin stopped at his floor and, when the door opened, a man in his sixties came out, pretty elegantly dressed, even if the clothes were dirty and creased. He wore a pair of round glasses, kept on by a crooked sidepiece. One of the lenses was shattered and the cheekbone

underneath was red with fresh blood, as if the man had recently received a strong blow on his face. A red rivulet was still dripping down his cheek before being absorbed by the collar of his shirt.

Giovanni shifted his focus on the Escort Guard – there was only one of curse – appearing behind the convict and he felt his stomach contract. Alex Allevi.

The ex-candidate for the Keeper position was unmoved behind his mirror glasses. He didn't wear them last time. They probably represented some sort of status symbol for the EGs, ora maybe they were just a vanity item. He advanced pushing the old man with the barrel of his sub-machine gun with energetic and nervous movements. He didn't even look at Giovanni; when they were in front of the Shutter, he took the form and declared: "As per regulation 9817/40, I deliver today to the Keeper of Tank 9 the convict Mario Debonis, sixty years old, grooming and fraudulent solicitacion of children."

The bleeding man groaned, nodding.

Giovanni stared at Alex for a few seconds, certain that it was him who hit the convict. It wasn't possible that the convict had been brought there from Confinement already in that condition: when ha convict was confined, he became a sort of *pariah*, untouchable. And until the Unloading phase he was not to be harmed in any way.

He did it when nobody could see. In the lift, with the barrel of his 13-S.

"Grooming and fraudulent solicitacion of children." Alex repeated to shake Giovanni awake from his state of bewilderment.

The Keeper instantly came to. He ticked the new guest's name of the fax, then input the Unlocking Code of the day. Debonis went in silently, ruefully, the binds on his wrists so tight that they left a vivid red mark on his skin. And justice took its course.

A few seconds of silence followed, a silence filled by heavy and labored breathing, ascending to burn against the neon of the Ring.

Alex hadn't moved, a hint he wanted to stay there, talk.

It was Giovanni who broke the ice. "Hi, Alex."

The Guard slowly took his glasses off and smiled tiredly at the former rival. "Hi, Giovanni."

The Keeper realized his throat was dry and tried to mitigate the halo of embarrassment hiding behind a simple triviality. "So… now you're a Guard."

"Yeah…"

"And… is it good?" An annoying drop of sweat ran down his back. He managed to dry it up by slightly moving his shoulder blades.

Alex, who still had his gun up, immediately lowered it. "Yeah, I… I can say so. They make us move a bit, from a place to another, where it is needed… but it's a good job, yes…"

Giovanni was under the impression he could read something else in his eyes: *you're way better off in here, you bastard. You don't have to work all that much and in the end you will leave with a compensation we can't even dream of.*

" Did you serve in other Tanks, too?"

Alex smiled bitterly, almost with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, but you know it's confidential. Nothing personal, Giovanni. But you're not in the military."

"No, of course. I understand. Rules are rules."

A thin layer of eyes created between the two; but it melt down almost immediately because Alex did something Giovanni didn't expect. He extended his hand.

"I… despite what you might think… I'm happy for you. And I want to congratulate with you."

Giovanni was left speechless, his mouth open, one second more than he actually wanted. Then he shook his hand.

"Thank you." He muttered.

He mentally blamed himself for judging the guy the wrong way. At least concerning the supposed rivalry between them. But there was still the problem of the pedophile's bleeding, black-and-blue cheekbone (even thought the man had more serious problems to handle now). He could pretend he didn't see anything, on professional level.

When they broke the handshake, he said: "Did you… do that to…"

Alex coughed and instinctively took a step backwards. "I've always hated pedophiles. And I don't think it's appropriate to tell you why. I had a very bad experience when I was a kid. I know I made a mistake. But I couldn't hold back."

Giovanni nodded. The young soldier had violated the rules, but he couldn't blame him. To be frank, it was possible he would do way worse, were he in his shoes.

"I know you should report me." Alex added defensively. "But… it would be your word against mine. You have now ay to prove it, you know? That bastard is gone. What do you say?"

Giovanni didn't move. His reasoning was ironclad. "I have nothing to say. If you had damaged the NMO in some way, I would be obliged to talk. But in this case…"

He let the sentence fade. The meaning of his answer was clear enough.

Alex got a hold of himself, preparing to leave. "Good. It was a pleasure meeting you again, Giovanni. Have a good day."

Giovanni saluted him, half-seriously and half-jokingly.

"I better leave. I'm already late. Better if I get back to the Center

to avoid any questions." He that got to the elevator and pressed the button to make the doors open. "If I'm assigned to any other single deliveries, we'll have the chance to chat for a while. If there's another guard…" he shrugged, walking inside the cabin.

A sudden question came to Giovanni's mind. "How's the general?"

While the doors were closing, Alex smiled and raised his thumb.

* * *

That night Giovanni couldn't get to sleep. There were too many relics in the surface of his awarness, waving lazily adrift. He wanted to grab one of them, but as soon as he thought to have made it, the makeshift buoy would turn over, sending them back among the waves. The Keeper's diary. Alex's tired smile. The bleeding face of that man…

He suddenly found himself facing a thought he yet hadn't, but that he knew it would annoy him more that necessary from that day on. What nightmares, what folly drenched the pillow on which his predecessor had slept, and was now his own? It was a crazy idea, of course. Yet, lying there, motionless, his eyes staring at the shadows on the ceiling, in the droning silence of that place of death, very few things seemed truly crazy. The previous Keeper had started losing touch with reality at some point. Not enough to lose its job, that much was clear. He still managed to hold the reins, reach the shore of December 31st and save himself, despite his brain starting to wander into shadowy lairs. After all, he had passed all the tests Giovanni had, so he was no doubt a sane person. He admired him, in a way. And as for the diary… it would stay where it was. He had to stop racking his brains on what was wrong and what was right. He had a conscience. And that conscience – always working in the background – had decided that the *less complications, less trouble* policy was to be preferred to any other.

His mind drifted off the real world right when the slightly psychotic thought that the NMO would examine the diary looking for his fingerprints was surfacing from the waves, hard and full of splinters like a broken slab of wood, but too far to grasp.

10 – A Dangerous Delivery

The first true incident happened – a coincidence, of course – on March 29th, his birthday.

The month had passed with nothing but the same old *routine*, alternating human, food, and clean sheets deliveries. He trained with weights, ran around the Ring, watched movies-documentaries-news on TV, read more or less difficult books: after finishing Jack London and Melville he was skeptically approaching Joyce; he already suspected he would end up putting him apart to go back to Hemingway (he would have gladly spent some time reading Poe, Baudelaire or Kafka, but their names – and many others with them – were not in the NMO's good side).

He had had a lot more nightmares, but he had gotten used to it. Waking up in the middle of the night from time to time never killed anybody; and if that was the price for staying in there for a year, well… he could stand it.

But on March 29th he had to face a very unusual situation. It was in the manual, of course, but it belonged to that kind of incidents everybody wished to be just fantasies from the authors' minds. An incident belonging to the *disorders in the delivery phase* section.

He had had two double deliveries (gypsies and earthquake jackals) in the morning; in the afternoon he had another couple, two drug dealers caught selling marijuana at the exit of a middle schools. The ones escorting them were Scalp and Steve (as in Steve McQueen, since he looked a bit like the actor).

There were no signs of the upcoming mishap. The first Guard, Scalp, read the names and accusations on the form out loud. Giovanni ticked them on the fax, then input the day's code for the third time (always careful not to make mistakes, adding 29 to each digit). The two new convicts slowly stepped towards the Shutter, staring in front of them. The first – Adriano, short, blond hair, in this thirties – obediently entered the glass cabin, pressing his chest against the Suffering. The man following him – Lucas, shaved head, thick build, a few years older than his comrade – was to do the same…

If only Giovanni had looked him in the eyes, he could suspect something and react accordingly. But he didn't. He never liked letting the convicts entering the Shutter cross gazes with him. It made him feel remorse, as if he were to be blamed for their deaths. His role – *one* of his roles, as Stevanich had underlined – was to be an executor, plain and simple (even if when the word *executioner* came to his mind, he did everything he could to send it away).

That afternoon was no exception. He didn't look at Lucas in the

eyes, so he had no way of realising the usual sedative-induced blur was completely absent, or almost. Whatever reason was behind that mistake, the man was still wide awake and with very bad intensions.

With a sudden movement, like a hunted animal, Lucas turned towards Scalp and kicked him in the groin. The Guard went down with a groan, his eyes wet with tears. Steve, caught by surprised, screamed and jumped backwards, trying to wield his 13-S correctly at the same time; because of the unseemliness of his movements the shoulder strap slipped down his left arm, impairing him.

In the meanwhile, the large drug dealer had lunged forward, slamming Giovanni with his shoulder and clumsily running through the Ring, in the opposite direction to they one they had come from.

Startled by the man's sudden movements, Giovanni lost his balance and fell on one side. Falling, he wondered why his head felt the warmth and pressure weight of a human body. Only after impacting with the coarse and worn down moving platform, he realized he was inside the Shutter from the waist up and that he had hit the back of the other convict, who was waiting to be unloaded. He instinctively went supine, panting, on his elbows. His heart was pounding in his chest, as if it was trying to escape from it.

In the meanwhile, Steve's screams and Scalp's hoarse groaning were rolling in his ears, amplified by the dark, polished walls.

Back on the Ring, Giovanni had to jump not to trip on Scalp, who was trying to get up. He was on his knees, his head still on the ground, looking like he was peeping through a hole in the floor. His cheeks, which were bright red when he was hit in the groin, now were almost grey.

Despite his current state of pain, he managed to growl. "Watch… the elevator…"

Giovanni brought one hand to the holster of gun opened it and extracted the Beretta. Hurried steps came from the Dark Side. Steve was following Lucas, whose intentions were imponderable. What hope did he have to survive? Did he think he could best three armed men and escape? He had no chance.

No bullet had been shot. The manual did allow the use of firearms inside the Tank, that much was true, but only in case of extreme need. And that, unless the situation deteriorated, was still a case that could be solved without recurring to guns.

Lucas showed arrived to the other side of the Ring. He was stumbling, his hands tied behind his back. Alerted by Scalp's words, Giovanni was ready to stop him from entering the elevator – whose doors were still open – but the convict went past it and rushed towards him head on. Steve appeared behind the fugitive's back, his sub-machine gun aimed at him and his teeth showing behind a furious

grin.

“Stop, you son of a bitch!” He ordered with a not completely firm voice.

Lucas, lunging forward with all his weight, completely lost balance. If Giovanni hadn’t moved swiftly, the convict would have fallen over him. Moreover, they would probably have fallen of Scalp’s back… but the Guard, having mustered enough strength to stand up, was quick enough to get out of the way; Lucas fell face first, sliding his nose on the linoleum for a meter or so. With a quick movement he turned on, pointing his bloody face towards the astonished observers. His septum had taken a weird shape, bleeding heavily.

Scalp, now stable on his legs – even if a bit stooped, a mask of fury and pain twisting his face – was pointing his FS 93 to the convict’s forehead using both hands, his arms extended. Steve, who had re-gained control of his gun, was aiming for the lower abdomen.

Giovanni, after a quick reflection, decided it was time to holster his Beretta. An armed intervention on his side would have been appropriate (dutiful even) if the EGs were in a *situation of objective difficulty*, as the manual said. But now everything was under control again.

The silence in which the four men started at each other was blown away by a toneless voice that left everyone a bit disoriented.

“Lucas?… what the hell are you doing, lying on the ground?”

By the Shutter’s door, Adriano was staring at his accomplice like a drunken man trying to understand what was happening, failing to do so. It was a really grotesque sentence. The Guards gave him an annoyed look. Giovanni, maybe for the impelling need relieve the tension, thought that the tragicomical joke could even make him laugh, in a different situation. For a second he feared he would burst into an hysterical laughter and he started sucking on the cut he had on his tongue.

“Quiet, you!” Scald said without taking his eyes off Lucas. “And go back in, if you don’t want us to break your face, too!”

Adriano muttered something incomprehensible to his partner, then went back on his steps and started banging his forehead on the Suffering, like a penitent faithful on the Wailing Wall.

After spitting a red clot which landed close to Scalp’s boot, Lucas grunted: “Come on, shoot me, if you have the courage. Nazi bastard, you and everyone like you… shoot, you coward! Let’s see if you still have the balls, after what I did to them!”

Giovanni’s breath condensed into a cloud of frost, clogging his lungs. Stave gave his colleague an alarmed look, probably expecting him to shoot the convict without thinking about it twice.

But Scalp was unmoved and his lineaments went back to his usual

neutral expression. “You’re smart.” He commented calmly. “But not enough.” He nodded towards Steve and Giovanni. “Pick him up.”

The two didn’t hesitate. Giovanni bent down and put one arm under Lucas’ right armpit. Steve did the same on the left side and, with a certain effort, made the dealer, on whose light blue shirt a red, damp tie seemed to have materialised. The man kept staring at Scalp, but at that point his arrogant look had already changed into something very similar to terror.

He barely managed to whisper: “Shoot me, pig. Shoot me, damn you…”

Scalp didn’t move e Giovanni admired him for that extremely lucid reaction. An example to follow.

“I know you would like it.” He stepped away, maybe to avoid another kick from Lucas. “Sorry to disappoint you, but you’re not the first to try. A bullet in the head is thousands of times better than what awaits you down there… too easy, man. Too easy.”

Then, nodding towards the Shutter. “Put him in.”

Lucas tried to free himself, spitting insults and blasphemy together with blood and saliva. But Giovanni and Steve tightened their grip, pulling him in front of the entrance; at that point Scalp, after holstering his gun, raised a leg and kicked him in the kidney with the sole of his boot. Lucas fell on his partner, who was waiting for him in a catatonic state, pushing him against the Suffering in a whirl of moans and jingling vibrations.

“Close it.” Scalp ordered.

Giovanni, overflowing with adrenaline, rushed to the push-button panel.

The door closed with its fatal puff. Lucas, on the other side of the glass, turned towards the Ring and started shouting words that the thick panel suffocated to a whimper. Understating him was impossible, but his bloody and terrified face was more than eloquent.

The Keeper was autonomous again; yet it was spontaneous of him to look at Scalp before proceeding to the Unloading. The Guard agreed silently, a tired look on his face, and only then Giovanni pressed the button that (*clang*) opened the Suffering and (*zzzzzz*) activated the moving platform.

The blurred silhouette swaying behind Lucas, Adirano, disappeared immediately, swallowed by the hungry, black void. But Lucas didn’t.

For a moment Giovanni was overwhelmed by the fear that the mechanism had jammed a Manual Discharge – a simple push – would be necessary as explained in the manual. But things were different. He was *walking*.

Matching the speed of his steps to the platform, as if he was on a

treadmill, he kept staring at Giovanni, who was frozen in front of the door, safe in the cold light of the Ring. Shouting was a waste of energy, so he had stopped. He barely moved his lips, red with the blood still dripping from his broken nose, keeping his desperate and furious gaze of the Keeper. The opaque glass prevented them from seeing the tears on his face, but his eyes were probably swollen.

None of the guards talked. They just stood there, like Giovanni, watching that absurd scene, exhaling excited breaths from their nostrils.

Giovanni felt almost hypnotised. The man on the other side of the glass would soon fall into the abyss. The conclusion to that sinister farce was inevitable. Yet he kept walking, franticly, his head shaking from the effort, panting, grinding his teeth. Behind him, the maws of the Tank were waiting patiently.

The Keeper's face, reflected in the lead-coloured crystal of the door, overlapped with the one of the dying man, eyes over eyes. The just on one side, the unjust on the other. Giovanni was sure he wouldn't move nor avert his gaze until the other would fall. And despite not being able to see them he knew that Scalp and Steve would do the same. They would watch, motionless, until the end. There would be no surrender, no shame, no fear on their side.

The scene seemed to crystallise and dilate; the heavy droning of the platform intertwined with the sharp one of the neon lights, whole hearts and lungs were beating the rhythm of tribal dances as old as life itself. But what seemed to have no end was over in couple of minutes.

Lucas suddenly pronounced a sentence, short and peremptory; a fluid movement of the lips slipping directly into Giovanni's subconscious. Then he simply stopped walking and closed his eyes. It was as if an invisible, clawed hand had grabbed him, dragging him backwards with bad grace. He disappeared in an instant, leaving a small halo of vapor in his stead, which soon dissolved and became a memory.

Scalp's solid voice imposed itself readily: "You don't need to count to thirteen, Keeper. We have used way too much current already."

Giovanni tuner towards him, the skin of his arms still crawling with excitement. He quickly turned back to the panel, pushed the Unloading button again and in three second no more noise came from the Shutter. The silence that followed bloated like a soundless explosion against his eardrums, making the circular walls of the Ring waver at the sides of his field of view.

"Good job, Keeper Corte. I will mention your behavior in the report."

Scalp talked like a high officer, despite being a simple EG. But Giovanni didn't care: he could act like the Supreme President of the NMO and it still wouldn't matter. His words were flattering and he thought that the report would even end up on Stevanich's desk. The suasive touch of gratification slightly relieved the pain he felt in his stomach. He thought that maybe the convict-sedation operators wouldn't be glad about Scalp and Steve's report, but that didn't interest him. If someone had made a mistake, it was only right that they payed for it. Because of somebody not doing his job, Giovanni had an ugly fifteen minutes. An *awful* fifteen minutes.

"Thanks, Sc…" He managed to shut up in time, and had the presence of mind to swallow loudly, simulating embarrassment.

Scalp smiled slightly, then started to turn towards the lift. Giovanni, wanting to be thoughtful, spontaneously asked him a question: "Are you all right?"

The Guard turned back towards him, raising an eyebrow.

"Down there, I mean." Giovanni specified, hoping his words didn't sound mocking.

Scalp stared at him for a few seconds; then, keeping a serious expression, he answered: "I'll let my wife judge."

For at least five seconds one could hear a midge fly. Was it possible that Scalp had just told a *joke*? Steve's chuckle, which similar to a raspberry, confirmed it.

Giovanni nodded contritely and Scalped did the same before adding in a low voice: "I feel better now. Thanks."

The second Guard bade Giovanni farewell by informally touching his own forehead with two extended fingers. Before turning around to follow his partner he pointed with the barrel of his sub-machine gun to a spot on the floor. "Can you clean it?"

Giovanni followed with his eyes the imaginary line that went from the weapon to the dark blood stain left on the floor by Lucas' nose.

"Sir, yes, sir." He said with camaraderie It was practically the first time since he started working there that he could see a small breach in the EGs' martial rigor. It pleased him. But as soon as the cabin's clanging noise softened, down at the Tank's feet, the grin he had managed to put on his face vanished.

He was alone again. In complete silence. With the Shutter's door staring at him… but no, it wasn't the door. It was the darkness. The darkness stagnating on the other side. And the wild eyes of all those who were drowning in there.

Without hesitating he went to his apartment, took a damp scrubbing brush from the bathroom and started erasing the last visible remnants of the incident.

* * *

It wasn't possible to recognise the newcomers at the center of the Well. Some convicts were upside down, legs wiggling from the dying, disordered mass. They reminded him of a mouse's rear legs, half swallowed by a python. Maybe Lucas was one of those, plummeting down and sticking among the other bodies head down…

Giovanni suddenly shivered and gagged. He though he had gotten used to that condensed agony. He clearly still had to. And train his stomach. Moreover, the prostration he felt was intensified by the word uttered by the man who could boast the longest Unloading time ever. "I'm waiting for you", he said. Maybe he was talking about all of them… he preferred interpreting it that way, since being personally addressed – even if by a man driven mad by fear and fury – disquieted and annoyed him. Those weren't things he should brood on, he knew that. During training, the instructors had warned them about possible aggressions (more verbal than physical) by the convicts, testing the reactions of each candidate when faced with aggravating solicitations. He had passed them with flying colours and now all those thoughts were making him feel inadequate.

However, after three months in the Tank, his weakening defenses were justified. He had had his share of emotional blows, locked in there with only the company of books, TV, and dying men. The psychologist had told him so. Three months. Already one quarter of the way. Or *only* one quarter?

It was irrelevant. He had to go on, one step after the other, one day after the other. The calendar was already missing two sheets and the third would soon be gone, in forty-eight hours. It was all right.

* * *

A laconic message appeared on the Postman's screen just before dinner (rabbit meat with salad, but he wasn't in a rush). "*Good behaviour with problematic subject.*"

Giovanni read that line over and over again, trying to get some satisfaction out of it. What could he expect? Compliments and praise for doing his job? In the NMO few formal words could have immense value. That message was satisfying. Not like a handshake from a superior, but in his position it was the best he could get. He wondered if positive and negative notes had an impact on his compensation. There was nothing about it on the documents he had signed and he didn't know whether to wish for it or fear it. Lacking the elements needed to come to a conclusion he input a simple "*Thank you*", left the

Control and went to dinner.

Watching an old movie starring Spencer Tracy, his mouth full of badly cooked meat, he muttered: “Happy birthday, Giovanni.”

He felt a fit of nostalgia for the days that would never come back – the ones from his childhood, when he celebrated with his mom and dad in the most pure serenity, before that drunken driver tore them away from him – and almost cried.

“You won’t start crying now, will you?” He said his father jokingly when he had blown over the sixteen candles on the last cake they would ever eat together.

“Nah,” Giovanni had laughed. “The smoke got into my eyes.”

His father had laughed, looking at his wife, who was watching her son in silence.

Giovanni still remember what they gave him as a present that day: a couple of novels, a black sweater with his initials knit on his heart and a silver fountain pen, a perfect imitation of those popular at the beginning of the Twentieth century. He had tried it immediately, writing a slightly crooked *Thank you!* on the back of the red paper in which the gift had been wrapped. His mother had kissed him on his cheek (she knew that Giovanni would forbid her were they in public, but at home there was nothing that could stop her). His father, on the other hand, had slapped him on the back of the neck, a gesture that showed how proud he was of him. Who knew how they would react to his application to the NMO? And where did that fountain pen end up? And the sweater with the letters GC knit in yellow, which looked like to weird moons on a night sky? Giovanni couldn’t answer those questions. Many, way too many things that had been part of his life once had been lost, or they had simply hidden, waiting to be found, but he had stopped looking for them…

“Mom?” He whispered. “Dad?” He closed his eyes, wishing he could hear their voices say his name once more. But the only imaged that filled the darkness of his mind was that of his parents lying on the morgue’s table, motionless under the two white, red stained sheets, lifted by the hand of the nurse so that Giovanni could say “Yes, it’s them.” And hadn’t said it, he had *screamed* it before exiting from that white and winter-cold room, sobbing…

He suddenly opened his eyes. He managed to hold his tears, because he knew that letting his emotions overwhelm him wouldn’t help. But it was difficult, very difficult.

* * *

Nemo me impune lacessit, so it was written on the wall over his

bed. That man had hit him. And he didn't go unpunished. He got what he deserved, nothing less. But… it had been an awful feeling, being inside the Shutter for even a very short amount of time. Who knew what those who couldn't get out felt. Many things had happened that afternoon, so fast that he had had no time to assimilate them. But the night is meant brooding. The human mind had the desperate need to, that he wanted it or not. Lying on his bed, Giovanni gave in to the images, sounds and feelings that overflowed behind his closed eyes. He saw the faces of the guards and the convicts, their expressions, their gazes; he saw the blood, heard the screams and the insults; over and over again he thought about those words – *I'm waiting for you* – on the bloody lips; and while the first butterflies started flying among his thoughts, a sense of vertigo deceived him with the illusion of falling. Lazy and calm at first, then growing more and more inexorable.

Where is my island? he wondered, falling, plummeting like one of the convicts that were dying, slowly, a few meters away from him. Few meters from the dreams and the sunny island waiting for him. *Is it still sunny, down there?* But where was *down there?* In a marvelous, persuasive other place? Or maybe the dark lair of meat and suffering, heart and stomach of the Tank? He couldn't answer.

There were no more paths to follow. The whole universe was at the mercy of the butterflies, the blood and the tears. The last image that Giovanni could see, grasping it with a splinter of consciousness, was Lucas drowning head first in that obscene swamp of agony. He could almost hear the noise, the sucking, lamenting noise, so unbearable that one could lose his mind, listening to it for too long.

11 – A Visit

In the morning of April 15th, Giovanni found out, much to his surprise, that the deliveries – two triple ones – were both in the afternoon. Nothing during the morning. It had never happened, apart from the Cleansing day.

He thought he could dedicate some more time to reading and physical exercise. A bit of weight lifting, a bit dickens, a bit of running around the Ring… but his plans were promptly canceled at 9:00, when the red light of the Spy and its terrible droning noise made him jump. The first thing he did was checking the fax again. Was it possible he had read it wrong? No, the it was perfectly clear: no delivery in the morning. Then what?

As a second, instinctive action, he secured the holster of the Beretta to his belt, then got out of the apartment and into the hallway. Luckily, he thought, he was already dressed adequately, expecting some unforeseen event driven by his sixth sense – or maybe by the strange schedule of the day.

When the elevator arrived Giovanni wasn't next to the Shutter. He wasn't expecting any deliveries; if on the other end there had been some glitch in the organization, he wasn't the one to be blamed. He placed himself before the sliding doors, choosing a stance that conveyed self-confidence. He couldn't get out of his head the idea that everything he did and said during work was communicated to the higher ups and evaluated to add up to some sort of final score.

But when from the cabin came out a disheveled, sweating man in his fifties, wearing a pair of very thin glasses and carrying a heavy, black suitcase, Giovanni was surprised. The regulations didn't allow unexpected visits from strangers, so he fruitlessly wasted time deciding how to behave. Could that man be a threat? Were they testing him, maybe? Should he extract his gun and order the stranger to present himself? Were he a soldier, he would be clearly recognizable. He was wearing a simple suit (beige jacket, white shirt, dark brown trousers); and even if it's true that people should not be judged by the way they look, that man looked harmless. Moreover, to get up there he had to use his ID card, authorised and emitted by the Center's Permit Office, so there were all the premises to rule out any sort of threat. Without letting the guard down, of course.

Getting out of the elevator, the man smiled at him and extended his hand, staring at him right in the eyes. "Good morning, mister Corte. I'm Doctor Nicastro, from the NMO's medical department. Nice to meet you."

A doctor? Of course. *Periodically, unless the Keeper doesn't explicitly*

asks so, the NMO will subject him to check ups to evaluate his physical and mental state: this was the passage of the regulation explaining everything! Giovanni breathed out loudly and shook the doctor's hand.

"Nice to meet you too, doctor."

* * *

The check up – nothing special: blood pressure, heart and lung auscultation, standard questions – lasted no more than fifteen minutes. Giovanni's body was strong, working out benefitted him, he ate properly, his reflexes were excellent… nothing new. It simply was the confirmation that all the parameters requested when signing up for the role of Keeper remained unchanged. The physical ones, at least.

"Good, mister Corte, good." Doctor Nicastro stroked the corners of his mouth with thumb and index, then asked: "Could I have something to drink, please?"

"Yes, of course. But I have no alcoholic beverages, as you know."

The medic waved his hands with a slight smile. "Oh, no alcohol of course. No, something refreshing should be enough, even just a glass of water."

"Let's move to the kitchen then."

From the bedroom the two men went to the kitchen. Giovanni pointed to a chair, then opened the fridge. "Some orange juice, maybe?"

"Perfect."

He filled two glasses and sat in front of the doctor. The latter half-emptied it in one go, then started looking around with a seemingly distracted expression. Giovanni, who too was drinking, watched him through the curved surface of the glass, making him look like some sort of being with a deformed and dilated face.

When Nicastro started talking, he did so with detached and professional tone with which he had conducted the check-up just a few minutes ago. "How do you feel in here, mister Corte?"

Giovanni put the glass on the checked tablecloth and started following the vertical grooving with a fingertip. "How do I feel… what do you mean?"

"Being secluded for months in a place like the Tank could cause problems. Do you think you have some?"

Giovanni weighted his words carefully before talking. *Of course I do. Is there anybody who doesn't?* No, it was better to walk safer paths.

"I have passed al the tests."

Nicastro nodded slowly. Now that the physical check-up was

over, they went on with the psychological one. A mine filed.

"I know that. I read your profile and the test results. Admirable. But you know… there's a very big difference between saying and doing."

"Yeah, I know."

Giovanni realized just in time he was being defensive, almost hostile, so he immediately toned his answer down with a smile to which the doctor gladly adapted. He had to avoid looking nervous. Any sign of instability could be used against him. He had to keep calm, look like a man of the utmost integrity. A proud member of the NMO.

The doctor was still waiting for an honest answer.

"Well, solitude can lead to boredom, it's pretty natural…" While talking, Giovanni scrutinized Nicastro's face, looking for even the slightest reaction, a minimal sign encouraging him to go on on that route. But the man on the other side of the table was more than used to not letting his patients understand what he was feeling.

(*Because that's what you are now, Giovanni? A* patient?)

"…but apart from that, I would say there aren't any… real problems."

"Why, are there any *false* ones?"

Giovanni kept smiling and had to loosen the hand he had the glass in. He was clenching it too tightly.

"No, I mean… no problem. Really."

"I believe you, mister Corte. And it's a pleasure to hear you say so. You know, the higher ups are always worried about their employees, even more so for those with delicate jobs, like your. But let me asked you a couple more questions, may I?"

"Of course. I'm at your disposal."

Nicastro leant on the chair's seatback and, without breaking eye-contact, he asked: "Any nightmares?"

There it was. A mine field: no, way worse than that. During the selections he had been coherent following a version and he had better not contradict himself.

"Nothing I can't remember."

"So you admit that you could have had some."

"I think it's impossible not to. But if I can't remember them in the morning, they probably weren't important…" He smiled again. Maybe not a very convincingly, though. He remembered some lines from his predecessor's diary. He still hadn't reached that point (*not yet at least*). No, he would never.

The doctor shrugged. "You're probably right. And… wet dreams?"

Giovanni's throat instantly dried up and he felt a hideous warmth expanding on his face. He had always been reticent on that particular

topic. “Well, I don’t really understand how this could… interest you. No offense, doctor…”

“Oh, none taken, mister Corte. And to dissipate any doubt you might have I want to assure you that this kind of questions isn’t meant to satisfy my personal curiosity.”

“I can see that…”

“You are an adult male, isolated in this place for twelve months, with no feminine company… you are heterosexual, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You have no girlfriend, despite your young age.”

“I have had a couple, if that’s what you are asking. But I’m… *single* now, as we used to say once. First came the studies, then the NMO… I chose to invest my time in those kind of things. As for girls… I think they’ll come looking for me once I’m out of here.”

“I think so too. Good for you. So, I was saying… you can’t blame me if I point out how such a situation could be… problematic, on the long term.”

“It is possible. But I’m sure I can keep it under control. These kind of questions were on the tests, as you surely know…”

“I do.”

“…and they came out positive.”

“I know so too. But… I hate repeating myself, so I won’t. But one thing is giving an answer on a test, being coherent with oneself for twelve months in a completely different story. I’ll make an example. Some years ago I visited the Keeper of another Tank, I don’t remember which, and he too said he could withstand the period of isolation and solitude without any sort of problems. He didn’t make it past Jun. I had to relieve him from duty because he gave sign of mental imbalance. He dreamt of being the Keeper of a female Tank and each night – in the dream, I mean – he let himself fall among hundreds of women, and he sank… an obsession that made him inadequate to his role.”

The two stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. Giovanni realized the doctor was giving him time to let the story sink in and react accordingly. He couldn’t think of anything better than a vague: “But…”

“Yes. But it was a borderline case. You look like a balanced person to me.”

Giovanni raised both his eyebrows. “Good to hear.”

Nicastro smiled. “Just a few more questions? Then I’ll let you return to your duty.”

“Of course, doctor.”

I suspect I really have no choice but to collaborate, don’t I?

“Thank you. So, it emerged from your profile that you were not

driven by personal motives, when you applied for your role as Executor, but only by loyalty to NMO."

"Exactly."

"But that was before. Now… I mean, now that you have experienced the act of taking life more than once, tell me: what do you feel when you push that button and make those rejects disappear forever?"

Giovanni stared at his interlocutor, trying to understand what the right answer was: "What do I feel?" He said trying to buy some more time.

The doctor interrupted him: "You lost both your parents when you were sixteen. A car crash with a drunken immigrant driving a stolen car, right?"

"Yes."

"Then you moved to an aunt's, from your father's side, if I'm not mistaken. A pretty complicated cohabitation… until you came of age."

"Correct."

"So, what I would really want to know is: how much hate have you got inside you towards some categories of people or what they represent? Do I make myself clear?"

Giovanni felt like he was swallowing a cotton ball. The buzz coming from the fridge was a far electric saw sensing his presence, hunting him down to sink softly into his skull.

"Crystal, doctor. I would lie if I told you that I don't get any satisfaction from my job. And you would notices."

Nicastro was unmoved and kept staring at him.

"Yes, there's some… *satisfaction*, I would say. Nothing morbid, of course. And I can't deny I feel a sense of personal revenge. But the desire to do my best in serving the NMO always comes first… and that's what's important. Isn't it?"

(*Isn't it? It's the right answer, isn't it?*)

The doctor nodded slightly and, finally averting his gaze from his interlocutor, smile softly. "Yes. Yes, mister Corte. Serving the NMO is what's important. Nothing to object. And I admire your honesty. It's a very appreciated git. I thank you for your cooperation."

Those words reassured Giovanni so much he felt light-headed for a second. "More juice, doctor?"

Nicastro answered by drinking what was left in his glass and standing up. "Thank you, but I don't want to take away more of your time. I'll let you go back to your job."

Giovanni stood up too. "Oh, I have nothing important to do this morning. Some exercise, some reading, cleaning up…"

"Good, mister Corte, good. And don't hold a grudge against me should I return. I'm not the one who decides. I go when I get called."

“Oh, well, sure. And if they maybe notified me before the visits…”

“Regrettably, that’s not possible. The visits have to be unexpected. A good part of their efficiency comes from this. Believe me, in my job the most honest answers are the ones to unexpected questions.”

“I understand. Never mind, then.”

* * *

After the doctor had left, Giovanni nervously grabbed the two small dumbbells. He wondered whether he had passed the exam, with his hesitant answers, his blushing, his reticence…

He hadn’t even started sweating that the began to think about the Keeper that had given up. A mass of feminine bodies, sinuous, moaning, in which to dive, to lose oneself… a truly perverted thought. He wouldn’t ever think about something like that. Or would he? In any case, now that Nicastro thought it was appropriate to get that image into his head, it would be difficult not to, from time to time. It was as if he had almost done that on purpose.

Giovanni spread his legs and started lifting and lowering his arms, like a heavy albatross trying to take flight in vain.

* * *

With the 3:00 P.M. delivery came three assassins: two for a robbery, one for passion. Scalp and Glutton (who had an incipient double chin) were the ones escorting them. Everything went smoothly. After the incident with that Lucas, the security controls during the sedation phase probably got stricter. Giovanni supposed that Scalp himself probably made sure everything was under control, in order to avoid further incidents.

The second delivery of 5:45 also went smoothly. The only detail that unsettled him a little was the accusation of the three men, all under thirty: *revolutionaries*. They walked past him with their heads bowed, hands behind their backs, like schoolboys going to detention. But, from how the third one raised his head when he walked by him, he realized he was about to tell him something, or at least he would try. He was right.

The new convict’s tongue – a moment before his feet stepped on the moving platform of the Shutter – managed to articulate some barely audible words. Giovanni could understand them clearly

enough. “We are many… and we are ready.”

The first guard, Scar, looked like he didn’t hear anything, and so did the second one, Glutton again.

Giovanni followed the procedure with indifference and the three enemies of the NMO disappeared from the world.

* * *

That evening, just before dinner, the Postman delivered him a message: “*Result of the physical and psychological check-up: positive. Congratulations, Keeper.”*

Congratulations indeed.

In his head there was little room for savouring his success. He felt clog-headed. He needed to run some more, after supper.

He felt the need to relieve a tension that didn’t want to show, didn’t want to be recognised. It was like having a thorn somewhere, but not understanding where.

There was the image of the man drowning in a sea of dying, furious, hungry, crazy women. There was the ineffable expression of the doctor, examining him behind the veil of a routine check-up. And those words. *We are many*. Who? The revolutionaries, of course. *And we are ready*. To do what? Where they trying to attack the NMO, overthrow it? Was there really someone so crazy to think he could succeed? The fact that more time to time this kind of people were brought to him meant the the NMO was perfectly alert.

But he didn’t need to make a problem out of it. Stevanich’s and all the other hierarchs’ military forces were more than capable of neutralizing any attempt to return… to what? The *status quo ante*? It was inconceivable. Those young men who were dumped in the Tank didn’t look dangerous, but had to be. They weren’t killers, not in the common meaning of the term; but if they spread ideas, *wrong* ideas, they had to be stopped.

He began to watched an already started movie. A war movie with John wayne. But when he realized he couldn’t discern the good guys from the bad ones, he turned the TV off and went to the Ring.

Fifty laps, until he was too tired. Then off to bed.

12 – The Voice of Damnation

The second Cleansing, at the end of April, went according to plan. He had reviewed every single action he had to perform and didn't say a word more than necessary.

The officer who came to supervise the process was the same as three months earlier, but the diver of the tanker had been changed. Giovanni had no way to know whether they rotated each time, depending on availability, or if he had been expelled for talking too much. It didn't matter. Every part of the process went smoothly and this time the lieutenant bade him farewell with a short: "Good. See you next time, Keeper."

It had a good ring to it. It promised continuity, stability. It told him he had behaved properly, that his conduct was adequate.

Once back in his apartment, Giovanni turned the TV on the music channel and let a symphony by Dvořák fill his ears in order to let all the bad thoughts go away. Yes, because with the passing of days he had realized that his darkest thoughts, the ones keeping him awake at night, the ones eroding his conscience (with an almost imperceptible levity, but also with such an insistence that they could ruin his life on the long run) weren't born inside him, but came from outside. He knew he was ready enough to protect himself; he had always shown a strong character whenever life tested him, so he didn't doubt that all his weakness and uncertainty were fed by the environment. The Tank was a cauldron of dangerous temptations, especially the one of giving in to discouragement and give up. It was a major risk, but the selection process he had undergone had declared his resolve was solid enough to complete the task he had been assigned to, without no preoccupations if not those bound to zeal and negligence.

This time, the Cleansing had no effect on him. Or at least it didn't unsettled him as much as the previous one. He had come to the conclusion that the trick was to lock out all the thoughts trying to get in, the wrong ones, that didn't do anything but hurt him. And to raise this mental shield he had learnt to focus on something, a sentence he would use as a mantra, until every external stimulus wasn't devoid of any emotional charge. And it worked, at least for a while.

"*I am the NMO. I am the NMO. I am the NMO…*"

He had started repeating it slowly when he went down to attend the Cleansing – stopping to interact without making mistakes – and he had gone on and on until the lieutenant's jeep and the tanker had departed, leaving him and the corroding bodies behind. As a result, he had felt pleasantly dazed, unable to feel dismayed by the pictures in his mind.

“I am the NMO!” He stated before the Well, noticing how the level of the greenish bodies had decreased.

“I am the NMO!” He repeated, sitting on the side of his bed, while violins and brass instruments chased each other in the otherworldly dimension where music exists, while we can only hear its echo.

“I am the NMO…”

* * *

Two deliveries that afternoon: a triple one (three drug dealers and panderers, who had already been filed and were recidivist) and a single one, a man who had killed his wife. Nothing particularly demanding or exciting. Apart from the fact that Alex was escorting the single delivery, at 6:15 P.M.

“So, how are you?” He asked the Guard as soon as Giovanni had counted to thirteen and closed the Suffering.

“I get by, thanks.” It was a vague answer, yet not so detached as to sound rude. “What about you? Do you still like your job?”

Alex wiped away a thin layer of sweat glistening under his nose using a fingers. “It’s OK. I’m not screaming in joy, but I can’t complain. They continuously move us, you know? That’s why you rarely see me.”

Giovanni raised an eyebrow. “As you said last time, I’m no military. Don’t let anything important slip.” He said it with a serious look on his face, but a trembling of his mouth was enough to express he wasn’t talking seriously.

Alex took the joke with levity. “Yes, yes… oh well, big deal: I had just got the job, so I wanted to stick to what we have been taught. I don’t think it’s a secret.”

“Neither do I.”

“Yes, we take turns in different Tanks, to avoid bonding with the Keepers. And if it happens… and it *does* happen, it’s inevitable… reporting every word isn’t strictly necessary. You know?”

“I do.”

“And rumors spread among us Guards, even if not officially. For example, I heard about what happened hear, the convict who tried to get shot by Lorenzo…”

Giovanni nodded, thinking it was Scalp’s true name. “Yeah, it was a bad one.”

“These things happen. I still have had no problems whatsoever, but I’ve heard that other people have. Maybe I can tell you someday.”

Giovanni understood their time was up and Alex had to go. But he needed to get a question out of his teeth. “Excuse me, Alex, but…

how are things out there?"

"Out there?"

"In the outside world. The real world." In the very moment he had used that curious expression he wondered how he came to think of it. As if the Camp and the Tank belonged to a less real universe.

"Why, don't you watch the new?"

Yeah, the news…

"Yeah, but… they say everything is all right, everything's awesome, everything according to the Order's plans."

"So? You don't believe them."

Giovanni, watch our: you're walking on nails. You're expressing your doubts to an NMO officer.

"Of course I do. It's just that sometimes I get to unload some revolutionaries, so I was asking myself…"

Alex looked at his watch, then quickly approached the lift. "Sorry, but I can't stay. Delivery times are monitored, and if I go back after the scheduled time I need to find an excuse. Anyway, don't worry. Everything's under control. Believe me. See you!"

He pronounced those last words with a higher volume, so that he could hear him above the buzzing doors cutting him away from the Ring, and from Giovanni.

Everything under control.

He had spoken like one of those anchormen. *All* anchormen of *all* the news channels. Giovanni wondered if he had dared too much, asking that question.

He could look like he had doubts.

And the NMO didn't like doubts.

* * *

That night, while he waited to fall asleep, he thought back to the former Keeper's diary, that bundle of sheets on which he slept every night. He hadn't thought about it in several days. But if his psyche decided that was the time for it to surface again, maybe there was a reason.

"Maybe it's an answer", he whispered to the grey shadows trembling on the ceiling. What did that sentence mean? He didn't know. It always happened to him, when he started to get tired. Most of the times he slipped into unconsciousness without realizing it; but there were times he noticed the small, weird, inappropriate ideas appearing in his head and surprising him with their apparent extraneousness.

How could the hidden diary on which he was lying be an answer?

Had he been on the island, on the sun, relaxing, he could have thought of a simple and linear explanation, perfectly understandable and rational. But in there… there, in that huge concrete cylinder full of acid and rotting corpses, where not a single minute passed without it being filled with anguish, suffering and death, with him not even noticing… him, the Keeper of Tank 9, the only sane cell in a world of endless pain. An angel in hell…

He was startled by a sudden twitch of a nerve of his leg and his heart painfully skipped a beat. He was hot. With a brusque movement he pushed the blanket away, annoyed. It was windy outside. A suffused, far, modulated whistle. It should have helped him sleep, and yet… he was still awake. But how much time had passed since he went to bed? He could ask the alarm clock on his bedside table just by pressing a button; the torpor he felt in his arms discouraged him, so he decided to lie on his back, waiting to fall into slumber. It was inevitable. Or maybe it had already happened, he couldn't say. It wasn't the first time he dreamt of being awake and when it happened he had no way to understand his condition. Sleeping? Awake? What difference could it make?

The diary on which he slept. It was an answer, sure. But to what question? The one that sometimes came back to molest him, like a fly being repeatedly driven away, but always returning. *Aren't you afraid?* Yes, sometimes. At night…

He wondered whether his eyes were closed or open, and he decided that particular doubt was of very little importance.

What am I afraid of? Well… there are a lot of things to be afraid of. (But you… you, Giovanni: what *are you afraid of? To lose your mind like Keeper before you?)*

Maybe. Everything oscillates. Here's sleep, here comes sleep… and if those papers on which I lie, those sick pages compressed between the frame and the mattress, dripped madness, infecting me, drenching the bed with the crazy ideas infecting it like parasites of ink?

(It's a nice picture, Giovanni. Parasites made of ink that produce fear… *it would be an answer. You have to take that diary, burn it. Even if you didn't read it all, that taste was enough to envenom your should, haven't you noticed?)*

No, such idiocy! It's just scrap paper, and in here I can't burn anything. I could unload *it. Good idea. Let's give those poor souls something to read, just to ass the time…*

And among the senseless spires of such thoughts Giovanni fell asleep, leaving his mind open for the most terrifying dream he had ever made.

* * *

All of the Tank's convicts have gotten out. How they did it is irrelevant. They did it and what's important is their irrepressible thirst for revenge. The Suffering has been torn away and so has the first door of the Shutter. Now tenths, hundreds of men fill the Ring, and many more surface from the black void vomiting them. And not all of them are alive, in the true sense of the word at least. Some have their neck bent in unnatural angles. Others have horrid bites on their necks, faces, or scrapes, bruises, lacerations. Giovanni knows, sees *all this, despite being still locked up in his apartment. With his ear on the reinforced door he listens to his own anguished rasping breath mixing with the hoarse groans and the unintelligible words coming from the circular hallway. The neon light work intermittently, their work about to be over. From the shadowy mouth of the Shutter even more bodies, each time less and less intact, less and less* human*, keep on coming out. The sulphuric acid has damaged them in various manners and in a short amount of times the things coming out of the Tank's depth haven't even got a recognizable shape.*

in the meanwhile, more and more ferocious fists bang on the door. They didn't come out to run away. They have come for him*. It's him they want and they will soon have him. Giovanni feels his heart crushed by the fingers of a terror so unbearable that it could even kill him. And it would be a blessing for sure. If those monsters get in, not only would be die a horrible death, but his soul would be lost for eternity.*

Screams an laments, out there. A whirl of suffering filling the Ring, rotating without rest. Anger and sorrow spat by throats more or less alive. Voices shouting truncated words; syllables flying like maddened birds in a sky of intermittent electric lights, trying to form his name. Giovanni knows they are calling for him, reclaiming *him…*

The terror devouring his insides is paroxysmal, and the Keeper understands there are only two ways out there: he can either die, or…

* * *

He woke up – in a hot and damp bed, all messed up, a tangle of covers – and he felt like he was going to explode. His heart and brain were screaming in unison inside him. The land of Nod shot him out of its territories with the speed of a cannon ball, sending him back to reality.

But… was he truly awake? He clumsily started moving his arms and hands, touching his sweating body.

Despite recognising the shapes and shadows of his bedroom's furniture, he could still hear those sounds, those groans, those curses. And a few seconds were enough to convince himself that they weren't echoes from his subconscious.

“It’s not true!” He said in melodramatic voice, branding everything he was perceiving as surreal. His heart – which since his awakening should have had slowed down a little – kept on drumming in his chest; and Giovanni couldn’t resist the impulse of slapping himself, hoping he would manage to banish those unrelenting voices in the back of his mind.

It was a continuous wave of laments and squeaks, brays and cries; and those wave spread on the floor of a low sizzle, as if they came from another world and could only materialize thanks to an audio device decrypting them.

The answer hit him like a wrecking ball.

Nobody had got out of the Tank. Nobody was laying siege on him.

On shaky legs he staggered out of the room, and, despite being sure enough about what he would find, he welcomed with infinite gratitude the confirmation to his suspicions. The voices were suddenly louder know. And also the underlying crackle. Entering the control, he had to put his hands on his ears.

On the console, a control light was on. The green light of the audio channel. And from a small amplifier hidden in the well the unbearable voice of damnation was pouring onto him.

An unpleasant thought spread his small, sturdy wings inside his head: did he press that button? More than once had he been tempted to do it, that much was true, but his common sense had always suggested to avoid that morbid act, not to hurt himself. What could he possibly gain by such an experience? But maybe, after holding back for so long, his mind had found a way to bypass the obstacle and satisfy his curiosity. Things had to be that way, there were no other explanations. And… when did he do that? *In his sleep?* The idea of sleepwalking wasn’t alluring, but it was the only one excluding action from other people. And there was nobody there, nobody…

He approached the console with hesitating steps and pressed the audio channel button with a finger. Inside the Well – at a much lower level than usual, due to the recent Cleansing – a mass of phosphorescent bodies churned obscenely. Those men’s voices ascended through the Tank, were captured by a microphone and vomited right on his face, while he listened to it in a state of bewilderment.

Had this happened the night before, with a much more crowded Tank, maybe those groans of pain would have been more deafening.

His thumb on the button. His eyes on the screen. A knot of thorns in his stomach. And the his head full of sound waves, concentrical circles bringing echoes of death from that lightless dimension directly to his soul. It was impossible to keep on listening. But so was stopping.

Turn it off, Giovanni.

"Yeah, I'll turn it off now…"

He was sleepy. His legs were shaking, as if he was standing on a vibrating platform, but he was also feeling light, ethereal, almost levitating. Those dying, molded, half-corroded bodies slipped one over the other, beyond the screen's crystal veil. And from their gaping mouths all of the world's despair seemed to come out.

He let another ten minutes pass before pressing the red button and let the maws of silence swallow him.

13 – The Diary Issue

The following morning he found himself in an unusual position, the one he was in when he tried to get back to sleep: curled up like a fetus, at the bottom of the bed: this is how he had fallen asleep, victim of such an emotional discombobulation he wouldn't normally be able to go back to sleep. But physical exhaustion got the better of him and he fell into a darkness merciful enough not to produce any more dreams.

A light, reassuring greyness reached his eyes and ripped away the shadows still clinging to his brain like useless posters hanging from a wall. He recollected all the night's events and immediately promised himself he wouldn't let them influence him in a negative way, thus ruining his day. What happened had to stay where it was, in the dark room where all the mental flotsam and jetsam were thrown away, with no real use no matter how many times one would examine them on different lights. Rubbish. Junk. Like the ones groaning down there.

He ate an abundant breakfast with pineapple juice, apple pie and pudding. He felt the need to store some energy. He had a devastating nightmare? Good, it was over now. Had he sleepwalked, turned on the Tank's audio, listened to those fires? Yes, so what? They were all pieces he needed to put into place, thinking of the year in the Tank as a big, uneven mosaic. His predecessor had suffered; maybe he wasn't as strong as he was expected to. But it was useless to look back, and so was the fear of possible future experiences: the path had been walked for a third. Four sheets of his calendar and been folded back, disappearing against the wall. And there he was, steadfast after all, and determined to get what he was owed once the job was over.

Staring at his image in the bathroom mirror, he whispered: "I am the NMO." And with that, he had said it all. Let the nightmares come. They would eventually leave like the others. He just had to not give importance to things that hadn't got any. It was a good *forma mentis* with which to face the eight remaining months.

He mimed shooting his reflection with his fingers, like a true american gangster of the movies.

* * *

The notion that the diary under the mattress had to be destroyed – which in his nightly, numb mental distortion had seemed reasonable – to him was now utter idiocy. How could he come to think it could *infect* him? He had also thought about the possibility of

throwing them into the Shutter, and that would objectively be the surest way to eliminate them. But the matter of getting rid of them or leaving them where they were was an old one, and a waste of time to go back to. As far as he was concerned, that stupid diary could stay there for eternity. Moreover – and he hadn't consider the possibility it up to that moment – maybe it wasn't even his predecessor who wrote the diary, but the one before him, or the one before that one. It was an unlikely, but interesting hypothesis. And if by any chance…

With admirable timing, the buzzing announcing the first delivery of the day saved him from the web of useless thoughts in which he was entangled.

* * *

May passed without incidents. The food and laundry services worked with clockwork precision. Books, movies, documentaries and music occupied the many gaps he had during his days, together with the physical exercise.

He still couldn't grasp the delivery schedule of the Escort Guards (Giovanni came to think that they were balloted), and from time to time some new faces to which he could give new, secret nicknames appeared. Like Carnival, a man with such a somber look that he seemed more crestfallen than the convicts he escorted, or Burr, a blond-haired man with a bad case of rhotacism. This kind of things wasn't fitting for a NMO representative, of course; but Giovanni managed to benefit from keeping his humor and fantasy alive. The Tank was the ideal place to make both disappear in a heartbeat, and growing these little bushes in the midst of the desert could be helpful.

The spring that filled Camp 9 didn't just affect the weather. It was also a state of mind. The bright light shining on the barbed wire filled everything with purity and, when Giovanni open the window of his bedroom, his lungs expanded at their maximum capacity to benefit from the invigorating power of nature. Even the deliveries and the unloading had become less emotionally engaging. No doubt that it was also because habit had kicked in: any monster could become family living with it long enough. In the new order, throwing those people, the kind who couldn't fit with society, into the jaws of pain and death was nothing but a dutiful act to be carried out with automatic gestures. Numbers and buttons, nothing else. There couldn't be a *man* in all this. Living inside the Tank required self-detachment; the more one's character fit in the required physical and psychological standard, the more linear would his year at the service of the NMO be. For him, to be honest, the path was steeper than he had initially

thought. But once having dealt with all the obstacles more or less directly bound to the role of Keeper, even a potentially unpleasant job like that became routine.

Giovanni was so sure of knowing the ins and outs of his job that he really felt more relieved. And it was probably because of that confidence that, when the message arrived on the first night of June, the floor seemed to tilt under his feet.

He was in the Control, updating the Management Register. From the kitchen, the performance of a celtic arp virtuoso – a kind of music Giovanni had always found particularly relaxing – was on TV when the well-known *beep* made him jump. 9:17 P.M.. An unusual time for receiving communications from the Center. It had to be something important. He had never been contacted after 8:00 P.M., and they were always comments on the deliveries or other events of the day.

He opened the message and the first impression he had was that the office chair he was siting on had distanced from the console, as if the floor had tilted. He would have felt the same on a ship pitching among the waves. Naturally it was just an illusion, an effect of the light faintness he had felt after reading those four words on the screen. "*Did you read it?"*

Paradoxically, the first thing that hit him as weird was the form, no the message. They had never directly asked him anything. It was of little importance, but considering the context, it gave the event a completely different emotional impact.

"Read *what*?" Vocally answering that written message instantly alarmed him. Under his ribcage, his heart started pounding like a blind bird in a cage.

"*What?"* he wrote. He should probably have written the question in a more articulate and deferential way, but he instinctively excluded that could be an official communication.

He stared at the screen for thirty second or so, until a second *beep* shook his nerves with a jolt of low tension current.

The answer was utterly illogical: "*Bed bed bed bed"*.

The notes from the harp started harmonizing on two minor chords, as if they caught the weirdness of the situation, and Giovanni felt sucked in by the spiral they created. *What did that mean? Who the hell was writing those absurdities?*

Hoping to make things right, he answered: "*Possible malfunction in the communication. Requesting clarifications, in possible."*

But when after five minutes no reply had been sent, he decided that there could only be two options: either there truly was some technical problem, some interference or whatever; or someone was having fun at his expense and the game was over, for now. Not having enough information to determine the cause of those incomprehensible

messages, he decided to choose the most linear explanation: the first one. And yet he suspected the second one to be truer.

The Register was left where it was. He had lost his concentration, and didn't even feel like listening to music anymore.

He turned off the TV, drank a glass of grapefruit juice – swearing because of the small, cold stain that expanded on his singlet – then went to his bedroom and sat on the bed, making the frame creak.

Why on Earth would someone ask him if he had read something? Was he talking about one of the books in the Tank? In that case, wouldn't it have been simpler to just say its title? No, the answer was elsewhere. It wasn't a book…

Despite knowing he reached the conclusion through completely arbitrary deductions, Giovanni couldn't help but think that the question – *Did you read it?* – was about the diary. And that word – *bed* – repeated in such an absurd way… it was a reference to the place where the diary was hidden. Someone was provoking him. Testing him. But why? And since it seemed that every question led to another, his doubts expanded like numerous concentrical circles generated by a rock thrown in a pond. How could the stranger who had contacted him know that damn diary was hiding under his mattress. Simple: *he* was the one who put it there.

"Ah, that's a good one!" Giovanni slapped his thigh with one hand. "So who was the one who wrote those messages? The former Keeper?"

He shook his head, stood up and started walking up and down the room. Beyond all the questions that had exploded inside his head, only then did he realize what the fundamental one was: what did he have to do? Whoever had poked him was expecting some kind of reaction. The possibility of the NMO being behind the bait-message was high, since very few people could access the Operative Center that was linked to the Tank, or so he thought. Now, if he decided not to do anything or just wait passively for other such messages, he would make a poor showing. His role required initiative, ability to face any kind of problem and most of all discernment. He had to be able to distinguish the situations he could manage on his own from those that needed the involvement of the higher-ups. Always without disturbing the general, if possible.

He approached the window and set his sight on the crimson and violet sky. Camp 9 was a completely still expanse, a vast space suspended between dream and reality that, after the sunset, was remodeled following the imagination of some invisible painter. Giovanni would have liked staying there to watch the world while it imperceptibly slipped towards the dark abyss of the night; but in order to do he would need a clear mind, free and well-disposed to dusting

off the day's dirt, ready to grasp the true value of such beauty…

Unfortunately, it wasn't so. The Tank didn't allow slipping away, not even in spirit. And the matter of the messages needed to be solved. He turned towards the bed, intently staring at it. He was given an *input* and it was his duty to demonstrate he had caught it. In the past, he had decided to ignore the diary. It hadn't been an easy choice, but he wanted to pretend nothing had happened. Things had changed now. Someone had given him a clue and he could exploit it to "find" the diary and give it to his superiors.

(*And how did you find it?)*

Interpreting the hint correctly.

(*What hint?)*

The one that is registered in the Head Office – Tank communication log.

(*Good job, Keeper Corte. You did the right thing!)*

Yes, he would do so.

Without hesitating he lifted the mattress and grabbed the diary for the second time. How would he have liked to spit on it! It was no more than a jumble of delirious thoughts, getting rid of it would no doubt make him feel better. And about the remorse he felt towards his predecessor: to Hell with it! He sure didn't do him any good, leaving that to him. Moreover, those pages were against the norms of the NMO. So, no more scruples: he would wait until the following morning, then he would announce his discovery. He would get of clean irrespectively of the diary being some kind of test or someone knowing about his existence under the bed. He would really do the right thing.

He leafed through those creased pages with contempt, avoiding reading their content. Then he locked them in one of the console's drawers. And as a demonstration of how powerful suggestion could be, he couldn't sleep more serenely that night.

14 – Four Words

Early in the following morning, even before dressing up and having breakfast, Giovanni sat in front of the Postman and input the text he had so carefully made up in his head.

"*I communicate the finding of a manuscript hidden between the frame and the mattress of my bed. It looks like a transcription of memories, probably of the former Keeper. I await dispositions.*"

He carefully read it a couple of times, asking himself whether he should give more information or gloss over the conclusion he had reached; it was inevitable to think he had read it, even only partially, to asses its nature. He decided that the message was perfect. He sent it and waited in front of the monitor with his hands crossed on his lap.

He never knew who was on the other side, when he communicated with the Head Office. He had some vague idea of the alternations of the military staff, but not of their rank and authority. For ordinary communications they were probably normal employees, while officers were involved in case of more important matters. Like that one, no doubt. He could almost see a soldier, maybe an EG, read his message, think about it for a second, than contact a superior with a certain hurry…

Beep.

There. Really fast. How much time did pass since he had sent his email? A minute? Two? They monitored everything with admirable rigor.

The answer was predictably laconic, but very clear: "*The EGs of of the first delivery will get it.*"

Good, it was done. Giovanni could almost physically feel the weight relieve from his back.

* * *

He was crumbling some biscuits into a bowl full of yogurt when he heard the buzzing rustle of the fax machine. He cleaned his finger and went to see what it was about.

Three deliveries, for a total of eight new convicts: thieves, scammers, a pedophile priest, a couple of revolutionaries… same old, same old. Under the list of names and accusations, in the space reserved for notes, a perfect block-lettered handwriting: *The Guard Giulio Lojodice had been assigned to collecting the exhibit*. An unintelligible signature followed.

"The exhibit." He tasted that word, which appeared almost out of

place. It sounded like something ancient, maybe even valuable. “I have slept for month on an *exhibit*.”

He chuckled and went back to the kitchen to have breakfast.

* * *

The first delivery was at 8:45 A.M. and, as always, the two EGs were right on time. Scar up front, as he had more years both of age and of service, and Burr in the back. Between the, three people that the good old Lombroso wouldn’t hesitate calling *unloading subjects*, had he lived at the time of the Tanks.

Giovanni did his part, as always, without mentioning the diary. It was obvious that Scar (*Giulio Lojodice, huh?)* wouldn’t leave before retrieving it, and so it was.

Once the mechanism of the Shutter went silent again, the first guard told him with a martial look (Had he any other?): “I have received orders of retrieving something.”

Giovanni moved before the sentence was complete.

“Of course. I’ll take it immediately.”

He went to his apartment and after a few seconds he came back with the papers. “Here.”

“Is this all?”

Giovanni could feel an acid answer coming from his stomach. *No. it’s just one part. I’ll give you the rest when I finish reading it, ok?*

“Yes, it is all.”

Scar weighed it, nodding. “Good, Keeper. I have been ordered to tell you that your behavior is remarkable.” Giovanni kept a stern expression. Smiling or lowering his head would be a rookie gesture. “Thank you. I just did my job.”

It would probably have been easier for everyone, at that point, to not think about it anymore and bid each other farewell, as usual. Ma Giovanni couldn’t resist the temptation of blocking Scar and Burr to ask: “Excuse me, but… do you think I’ll get to know something about it, sooner or later?”

The Guards stared at him as if he was some kind of weird animal. Scar tilted his head and, with his coarsest voice, asked: “What do you mean, Keeper?”

“Well, something about the diary. If it belonged to another Keeper, if some measures will be taken… I would never want that…”

He didn’t feel completing the question was necessary. The Guards had entered the cabin way before his voice faded into a whisper. He was sure they wouldn’t answer. But while the doors closed, Scar poked him with a: “Keep to your place, Keeper.”

And the familiar clangor of cables and pistons joined them in their descent, after that exit worthy of an expert actor.

Giovanni went back to his apartment with a light step, a satisfied grin on his face. To tell the truth, he didn't really care about what would happen after the delivery of those papers. He had gotten rid of them, and that's what was important to him.

* * *

That evening, at 10:40, he had to change idea.

He was taking off the cotton pants he used as a pajama, when a *beep* came from the Control. He immediately went still as an instinctive reaction.

Someone – the same person as the night before? – had sent him a message. And it wasn't work-related, he imagined. It was with a certain reluctance, and a small, yet annoying knot in his stomach, that he reached for the Postman and read: "*Revolting pig spy bastard."*

Silence, except for the incessant buzzing of the fridge and the blood that turned his temples into small drums. With great calm, slowly, Giovanni sat in front of the keyboard, without taking his eyes off those four words. Four. Like the previous evening. Like the tetragram. Now that every kind of misunderstanding had dissipated, maintaining officialdom wasn't necessary anymore. That provocation had to be faced with no roundabouts.

"Ok, if you wanna play, let's play."

His answer was sent after a nervous ticking.

"*Who are you, coward?"*

It was like fighting in the dark, taking turns in throwing four-pointed shurikens to each other. He had already decided that, had he not received an answer in a minute, he would go to bed and abandon that childish act.

(*Are you sure it's a game? He called you a spy, haven't you noticed? It's not a random offense. It's because you informed the higher-ups instead of keeping it to yourself. You hadn't thought that the one writing you could be…)*

He leant on the seatback, crossing his arms, refusing to contemplate the though. But it completed itself.

(…*the author of the diary?)*

"No way…"

Beep. There it was again.

"*It is not important. Who you are is. What you must do. Do you know it?"*

Fantastic. Four times four. *Four points for you, friend.*

The annoyance that Giovanni felt suddenly shattered the shell restraining it.

"*A game is fun as long as it's short.*" He input clenching his teeth. "*And this went on for too long. Either you speak clearly or go to hell. Let's hear it, what is it that I must do?"*

He started counting the seconds. The *beep*, a strange coincidence, came exactly at the thirteenth. Like when he had to wait to close the Suffering.

What he read made his mouth go dry.

"*Die die die die"*

Had he still any doubts about the mental health of that imbecile, he was sure now: he was talking to a madman. Who he was, and how could he communicate with him freely (*Nemo me impune lacessit),* remained a mystery. But he sure as hell wouldn't play along.

He remained there for another ten minutes, without answering, waiting to receive further provocations. But the the interruption of the communication on his part was also the end of that pitiful exchange of threats. For that evening, at least.

* * *

Lying on the bed, his hands joined at the back of its head, he concentrated on the light and dark that created moisture stains made of shadows on the ceiling. Did he have to talk to someone about it? Probably yes. Maybe it was a joke; more than a Guard would gladly pull something like this, the only civilian in a world of soldiers. But he couldn't rule out the possibility of it being something serious and that somebody really had some bad intentions towards him.

He tried to think about the tropical island surrounded by a clear sea, blue like a topaz… but the image he managed to summon was faded and unstable, like an out-of-sync TV channel.

Giovanni turned on his left side, towards the wall, and waited for the current to push him into the whirlpool.

15 – Thunders

The second half of June brought the first storms.

Fat, imposing, clouds of lead flew over Camp 9, enormous and gibbous, always ready to pour water and darkness unto the earth below. The organization and pace of the deliveries didn't change, though. No even the most vicious downpour could stop the vans full of new convicts, and Giovanni thought that – however illogical that might be, having the possibility to wait for the sky to be clearer – everything fitted perfectly with the operative and programmatic schemes of the NMO. Nothing and no one had the right to upset the New Order., not even nature.

The fact that he was always indoors made him feel privileged, in a way. And the Guards getting out of the elevator leaving small puddles with each step, dripping water from their hats and noses, looked at him with rancor-veiled faces. But Giovanni had started noticing the way they looked at him also because he was sure that the hateful and delirious messages the Postman had delivered him came from one of them.

He had no evidence, of course; they were just suppositions. After all, after that stupid, quadruple death threats, his mysterious enemy had disappeared. He even thought he got tired of the game or was transferred who knows where. Maybe he would be back; but he didn't hear from him in at least twenty days, and that was enough.

* * *

The days passed in a predictable manner, alternating from the security and boredom coming from habit. Human waste being obliterated, watching the news (nobody saying anything about riots or political revolts), documentaries, larvae sent to die, more or less relaxing reds, music, parasites thrown in the abyss, war or adventure movies, some exercise…

One episode managed to breach the apparent emotional stability that Giovanni had reached happened in the last week of June, when a deafening storm one afternoon and the absence of any more deliveries suggested him to take a long run around the Ring.

The thunders almost always came unexpected, since the lack of windows didn't let the lightning warn him. And every time the sky rumbled, the weak neon lights trembled.

Giovanni started running – at a moderate pace, a jog in the park – at 6:45 P.M. He had decided not to stop before an hour, but it was

only an idea. The last time he had managed to go on for forty minutes, slowing from time to time in order not collapse. All in all, he was satisfied of his physical form. With that pace he would get out of the Tank a lot fitter than he was at the beginning of the year and that made him proud of himself. Some people had told him he would probably get thinner, or weaker, that closed spaces and artificial lights would endanger his health… to that thought, he swiftly raised his middle finger.

Running while his heavy breathing overlapped with the rumbling thunders infused him with a sort of primitive euphoria. He could almost feel, with an unknown antenna in the center of his brain, the screams of all the generations since the dawn of humanity, whose echoes resounded unheard in the head of the modern man. It was just an idea to be contemplated while his rubber soles hammered the linoleum – *thump thump thump* – and sometimes squeaked grotesquely.

He wasn't interested in counting the laps this time. He wanted a free mind, in a free body. And each time a thunder coming from a faraway sky fell and shook the Tank to its foundation, he unconsciously accelerated, even if just a little; those long crashes reminded him of a beast's roar, a beast he had to escape from. The comparison made him a bit dizzy, he could feel a needle penetrate in the back of his head.

Thump thump thump…

Porthole-Escape-Elevetaor-Apartment-Shutter… and a sabertooth tiger following him.

He wanted to relax; but he realized that his head had a desperate need to expel all the rot filling it, even in the form of pernicious fantasies. Physical effort, the circularity of the track, the ancestral, powerful, thunderous calls from the clouds… all those stimuli fighting against his balance, against the emotional armor inside which he knew he had hidden in order to go on and not give up. He didn't want to see red cats on the bad, hear noises inside the walls.

Why on earth did he read that *rubbish*? He knew he was easily influenced and he also knew that everything that got into his brain would surface sooner or later. It was enough for him to be victim to the right amount of pressure, like in that moment, and everything started wavering.

Like the Tank.

Evelator-Apartment-Shutter-Porthole-Escape.

Running counterclockwise he bent slightly to the left. *Thump thump thump.* And with the right amount of concentration it wasn't difficult to imagine that the Tank was abandoning its vertical axis, falling extremely slowly under its own weight. The ground – underneath and all around the building – was a swamp of rotten

corpses, corroded and melt flesh, sick food for grass and worms. *Tu-thump tu-thump tu-thump.* And those tons and tons of steel and concrete couldn't stay up anymore, however desperately the foundations tried not to sink in and let the Tank keep on towering…

Tu-thump… tu-thump…

It was while a thunder faded out in the distance that Giovanni realized he was hearing something new. And it did so suddenly , driving away any other useless speculation.

The noise of his steps had changed. Had… *doubled?*

Tu-thump tu-thump tu-thump tu-thump…

Without slowing down he focused on his hearing. Yes, there were no doubts. His quick and vigorous steps had started echoing along the Ring, a muffled reverb, yet a very audible one, that he hadn't heard before.

The laws of physics couldn't have suddenly changed without a reason. Maybe he had never noticed it before, while in that particular moment – because of the thunders, the tiredness, the blood pumping in his ears – he could, and that was all.

Yeah, it really seemed like…

(*Don't even think about it, Giovanni*)

…someone else was in the Ring. Someone running, just like him.

He heard: *Tu-thump tu-thump.*

It was really eerie. The more his head revolved around that crazy idea, the more the impression of it being plausible grew stronger. The sounds bounced, rotated, intertwined…

As a result, it really looked like somebody was following him, or was running from him, constantly keeping on the opposite side, in the shadows of the Dark Side.

He tried slowing down. That strange acoustic phenomenon adapted immediately, slowing down the ghost that Giovanni's mind kept on summoning. He then stopped, and so did the echo.

He remained still, panting, bending just enough to put his hands on his thighs. And listened. Beyond his own breathing, beyond the diminishing noise in the sky.

Nothing. And even if at a few meters from his hundreds of agonizing bodies contorted, he couldn't hear any extraneous signals. The ghost had stopped, too.

What are you doing? You're thinking about ghosts now?

Never. But he looked behind his back, driven by the image of a shadow slipping along the curved wall, announcing a human form. How would he react, had he really seen it? He hadn't got his Beretta with him. Why would he ever run along the Ring armed? No, he was becoming paranoid. He had to snap out of it.

There was nobody else in there. And he let himself be fooled by

sound-waves. He stood up again and heard some vertebrae click in response to the sudden movement. He brought a hand to his forehead. Hot and sweaty, of course. Was he catching the flu? Well, after supper he would probably take some medicine, go to bed, and good night. But now…

He couldn't hold it. He sprinted forward, this time clockwise, and completed a lap among the slaps of his soles and the coughs, grinning because he couldn't resist that temptation growing in his head like a fungus in a corner of his mind. Did he hope to find some intruders, using the surprise effect?

Now tired (how long did he run: half an hour?) and vaguely disgusted by his own fixations he went back to his apartment and decided he would find his calm and clarity of mind under a hot shower.

16 – The Interview

The following day began the wrong way.

The weird ideas that had filled his head the previous evening, as always, were washed away by a good night's sleep, a couple of aspirins, cold water on his face and an abundant breakfast. But the aura of positivity that seemed to irradiate from the morning and from which Giovanni tapped to face each step of the day was destroyed in front of the Postman.

The icon message was blinking. He didn't hear the *beep*. It had probably arrived when he was in the bathroom. He opened it without delay and stopped breathing for a few seconds.

"*You are awaited outside the Tank at 9:30 A.M.. Chief inspector Corsini wants to talk to you. Subject: the exhibit found in your bedroom.*"

A discouraged moan came out from his half-open mouth and a knot formed in his intestine. An inspector wanted to talk to him? Ok, fine.

He looked around him as if he was looking for something. But he wasn't, if not a lifeboat to which he could cling before his thoughts went astray.

At 9:30.

He grabbed the fax with the daily deliveries. There were three. At 9:00 A.M., at 3:00 P.M. and at 5:30 P.M.. Good. Only twenty minutes until the first one.

He got ready, making an effort to remained anchored to what he was doing. This unexpected interview had disoriented him and, however precise could every input from his brain be, his mind insisted on making conjectures, depict scenarios, prepare answers to questions he still hadn't been asked.

He should have expected it, however. He couldn't really think that the NMO would just drop the whole thing. He had no doubt that since he had delivered the diary – or maybe even since he had informed the Home Office he had found it – a bureaucratic process inevitably ending with a direct confrontation with him had started. And the moment had come.

With the first delivery three rapists came, escorted by Scalp and a new guard with a slightly dismayed look. The first thing Giovanni usually did when a newcomer came was to give him a secret nickname, but that day nothing came to his mind. He went on with the Unloading mechanically, too worried for the interview to focus on anything else. He almost got the Code wrong; and he would have, hadn't he checked the date on the fax.

While Scalp (Lorenzo, if his memory served him correctly, was

going back to the elevator, Giovanni wondered if he should try informally asking him a couple of questions. Did he, by any chance, know Inspector Corsini? Were there any news on the diary he had found? What did they want to know from him? But he would just waste time and words, he was perfectly aware of that. So he kept his mouth shut.

He checked the time on his watch: 9:14.

He went back to his apartment and looked out of the window, watching the van with the two EGs go back to the Center, heart and brain of everything that happened in the Camp. Giovanni thought that from that small built up area, way over there, Good and Evil came for him, good and bad new, instructions, commendations, convictions, threats, rancors, solidarity, envy… everything. Everything came and everything went. But maybe, thinking again, the heart of the Camp wasn't there. The brain was, but the heart… *he* was the heart. Not him as Giovanni Corte, of course; but the Tank, which he represented. The whole Camp 9 existed in function of the Tank, that enormous justice-handing cylinder. It was a true honor to be somehow a physical symbol of it, its only referent and supervisor. His mantra was *I am the NMO,* but he should probably change it to *I am the Tank*, jokingly paraphrasing the Sun King.

Once he had wondered why the New Moral Order would rather choose a civilian to be the Keeper and not use the military ranks at his disposal. He had shared this with some of the guys who had taken part to the selections with him, and they had turned the question to the instructors; they were explained that sending a soldier – who was clearly trained for other activities – to the Tank would have been a waste, also tanking the semestral alternations in consideration. Moreover, involving civilian in the Order's organic without forcing them to join the army was one of the policies the NMO had adopted. So, there he was: Giovanni Corte, Keeper of Tank 9, halfway through his path with all the high and the lows thereof.

He stretched the corners of his mouths. Why would he think about that now? Well, it was one way of killing time without grooming on the confrontation awaiting him.

Resting his head against the windowpane he tried to see the reflection of his own eyes, and succeeded despite the light.

"Don't be scared." He told himself.

Then, instinctively, his gaze looked farther away and caught sight of the car coming from the Center. He didn't know the model (he could rarely recognize them), but he could see it was long and black. And he understood with a wave of discomfort that it was time for him to go.

* * *

The car stopped about ten meter away from the Tank in the same exact moment Giovanni got out of the lift.

A BMW, he noticed. Seeing one was weird in a context of seemingly only vans and other military vehicles.

Two men got out. One, the passenger, was probably Corsini: medium height, an elegant, dark suit, a silver tetragram pinned to the collar of his jacket; his hair was worn back and the reflexes hinted he used some kind of styling gel. The other one, who was also the driver – but couldn't be *just* the driver, or he would have stayed in the car – was a bit slimmer, brown-haired, less meticulously combed; the sweat stains under the sleeves of his white shirt were clearly visible.

Giovanni went to met them and quickly they introduced to each other. The first one introduced himself as *chief inspector Nunzio Corsini, investigative department.* Vigorous handshake, very martial. The second one mumbled a surname (Adelfi? Adelchi) Giovanni couldn't grasp. His handshake wasn't as strong, it was actually pretty soft; that particular, which could be seen as a symptom of shyness or discretion, was immediately belied by his eyes, which were were bright and clasped to Giovanni's like hooks.

"Good, mister Corte. I immediately was to tell you that I have no intention to waste your time." Corsini's voice was calm, but it gave away an unmistakable feeling of authority.

"No problem, inspector. I'm at your disposal."

In the meanwhile, the man with the unintelligible surname had taken a step forward. He kept his hands on his low abdomen, one over the other – he could be mistaken for a football player waiting for a penalty kick – and his eyes wouldn't get off Giovanni's face. It was embarassing, other than annoying.

"You have found a manuscript, some days ago."

"That is correct."

"Hidden under your bed."

"Between the frame and the mattress.

"Right."

It was obvious that this premise was just a recap, like in TV shows. And it was as obvious that he question because of which the inspector had come wouldn't be delayed for long.

"And… an irregular communication had aroused your suspicions, so to speak."

Giovanni coughed and scratched his chin. Adelfi (of Adelchi) tilted his head a bit, staring at him as if he was a painting. Could he be a bodyguard? He didn't have the right physique and he couldn't understand where could be possibly concealing a weapon. It was way

more possible – sure, actually – that Corsini was the armed one, probably a gun under his jacket."

"It is so, inspector, you can check the records…"

Corsi nodded, to cut it short, and Giovanni regretted that last sentence. Of course he had checked.

"When you informed the Center, you added a personal note."

Giovanni bit his lower lip, assuming the expression of someone trying to remember something.

The inspector help him in this regard. "You wrote that, in your opinion, those sheets were a recollection of memories of the previous Keeper. Am I right?"

"Yes, right. I wrote that."

"Did you read the diary in its entirety?"

He hesitated for a second. Corsini's partner squeezed his eyes as if he had sunlight in his eyes. But the sun was on the other side of the Tank, whose shadow embraced them in a pleasant cool.

"No, inspector. The beginning, of course. And some parts at random, here and there. It was enough for me to understand… to suppose… it was some sort of diary."

"And so you thought it could belong to your predecessor."

"Yes, but it was only an hypothesis. And I'm sorry if…"

Corsini waved a hand, shutting him up. "I told you I wouldn't waste your time, Corte, and I don't want to belie myself. I'll of straight to the point. The manuscript has been thoroughly examined, and…" A short pause, long enough that Giovanni could feel the sweat on his arms. He could feel the imperative need for a shower. "…despite the reported dates, it was written just a few months ago. Between December and January, to be precise. Not earlier nor later."

Giovanni felt pins and needles on his feet. His heart contracted and his tongue got stuck to his palate. Corsini was staring at his and so was his silent partner, ever immobile.

HE opened his mouth, trying to find the right thing in answer to that shocking information.

"How… how is that possible?"

"I hope you don't doubt the exactness of our appraisal."

"Doubt? No, of course not, inspector…" He looked at Adelfi, or Adelchi, hoping to see some understanding or benevolence emerge from his face. But inscrutability had found its champion. "I'm just… baffled by what you just told me" he added, feeling like an insect under a magnifying glass.

Corsini was unmoved. He waited a few seconds, then shot the bullet. "Mister Corte, the question I came to ask you is this: did you write that diary?"

The shadow of the Tank seemed to clot over Giovanni, freezing

the layer of sweat covering every inch of his skin. He tried to breath, to feed his suddenly arid lungs, but all the air in the world and gotten away, leaving him in a sphere of void.

The three men remained there, still, while a delicate breeze made their clothes swish. Giovanni looked at one of them, then the other. The inspector and his partner, on the other hand – making him the only object of their undivided attention – didn't move a muscle. The scene crystallized for about twenty seconds, an unbearable amount of time; then, finally, Giovanni realized he could still breathe, and talk.

"No."

A direct answer. It was all that could get out of his mouth without his voice cracking in a ridiculous bleating. Swallowing his own heart back to its place was a priority.

Corsini stared at him for a few seconds, then he turned towards his partner; the latter, for the first time since they had arrived, took his eyes off Giovanni.

"He's telling the truth, inspector."

Corsini's facial muscles immediately relaxed and his expression, which had imperceptibly stiffened during the interview, went back to a mask of formal serenity.

So, that Adelfi, or whatever the hell his name were, was a… what was the right term? Giovanni couldn't remember, but immediately understood that his function was to study his every movement, tremor, variation in the tone of voice, any small signal that give him away as a liar. So… had he passed the trial?

"Good, mister Corte," Corsini told him. "I have done what I had to and got what I expected. I hope you won't begrudge us, but I'm sure you understand that every suspect, even the smallest one, has to be dissipated."

He moved his hand forward and Giovanni shook it.

"You… you just did your job, inspector." He felt devoid, confused. Despite wanting to do so, the information he had received was way too much to be processed immediately. He felt a horde of question rising from his stomach, even if he knew he wouldn't receive an answer.

The man who had analyzed him shook his hand too, but he was smiling this time. The exam was over, so he could be more human.

"I'm sorry if I have caused you discomfort," he added, "but that's how it works."

"Of course", Giovanni answered. "It is, indeed." And he hoped that man wasn't still vivisecting him; only in that moment he realized what danger he had faced and hoped that the signs of panic from the narrow escape didn't betray him.

* * *

Inside the elevator cabin, heading back to his realm of nightmares and hopes, Giovanni leant his back against a wall. The vibrations of the whole mechanism and the overall tremor shaking his body fused in a tumult of concentrical waves.

While the inspector put him on trial, his partner had scanned him, without him knowing, ready to denounce him would he make a mistake. But he had been sincere. He had told the truth. The emotions he had felt were completely justified by the context and the difficult topic of the interview. Then, why was he feeling such… terror?

Once back to the safety of his apartment he drank half a can of ice-cold orange juice, regretting not being able to drink something stronger. It would have helped him. Maybe.

When he went to lie on the bed, he was still trembling.

What would have happened – a part of his mind kept asking, a fraction particularly keen on self- *had Corsini asked you another question? Not any question, but* that *one? Do you think his friend would have noticed? And in that case, would there have been consequences?*

Giovanni sat up, unable to breathe comfortably while supine. He knew he would calm down before long. But he had to wait. Wait for the heart and brain to find their balance and let him live hi say in a straight line. It would have been a problem had they asked Giovanni how long had he *really* know about the diary. He could almost hear it: "*Mister Corte, have you found the diary only after the messages, or did you already find it and did not tell anyone?*"

Had they asked him that question, lying or telling the truth would lead to the same, disastrous result. And maybe he wouldn't even be there in that moment.

17 – Inside the Shutter

On the night between the 6th and the 7th of July Hell itself paid him a visit.

One week had already passed since his dangerous interview with Corsini and he still hadn't received any news about the possible developments. He had thought over and over about what he had been told that date on the real age of the manuscript. He really didn't know what to think.

His first hypothesis was that his predecessor had written those pages during his last month in the Tank, taking from memories, notes, dreams and so on, simulating a pretty concise yearly diary. The reason? He had no idea. That poor guy, for what he had understood, had reached the end of the year with a big nervous breakdown; every kind of weirdness was possible.

To be truly honest with himself, the first idea he had had was different. But he wanted to discard it immediately for two reasons. First, it was highly unlikely, if not impossible; second, only taking it into consideration would endanger the stability of his mind's structure. It wasn't possible that he, in who-knows-what altered state, would write those pages, hide them under the bed and then forget everything. The writing wasn't his, of course, but any schizo could alter it without effort. No, no, no. That wasn't the right way.

And yet, if the writing were his predecessor's (and the diary had no doubt been examined graphologically), they would have already traced him. Did they? Of course. He was sure to be their first suspect. But… if they were still looking for a culprit, it meant that the former Keeper had nothing to do with it. It was a complex matter. So complex that in a couple of days he decided not to think about it anymore. The NMO's investigation could go on in a superior dimension unreachable to him. If they decided to let him know something about it, then good; otherwise, he would be much better off just forgetting about it.

* * *

In the late afternoon of July 6th started what would be the strongest storm of the whole summer, and it went on all night.

Immense, dark cloud could already be seen coming from the west in the first hours of the afternoon, foreshadowing the chaos they would eventually bring. The first drops started falling – loud, heavy and cold – after the last delivery of the day, at 5:30 P.M.. From the window of his bedroom Giovanni watched the two Guards, Wrinkle

and Carnival, run to the jeep and leave in a rush to reach the Center before a lightning bolt could strike them. That image made him smile, thinking it wasn't too unlikely after all.

Then, finally, the clouds' bad mood – which to that point simply manifested with a dull growl – exploded in a hail of bursts, roars, lightning, and most of all water, a loud grey curtain isolating the Tank from the rest of the world.

Giovanni killed the time separating him from dinner trying to read something while lying on the bed. At the pace he was finishing his reads, he would soon have to ask for more. Whether they could satisfy his request or not was a different matter. He had started a collection of short stories by Calvino, then he would probably move on to Tolkien. He wondered if his predecessor had the passion for literature he had and how many of the books did he read. The volumes didn't look used, at least not as much as the ones in libraries. He couldn't say, so he could just hope that his predecessor didn't have the horrible habit of turning the pages after licking his fingertip.

After half an hour or so he realized the storm's racket didn't let him concentrate properly. His eyes went from one line to the other, but the information he sent to his brain were crossed by thousands of other thoughts, filters destroying their meaning.

The thunders, the pounding water, the feeble, yet unsettling wind whistling through the cracks in the window's frame… Giovanni's ears were filled with sounds and noises. And his mind – *damn it!* – wandered back to the laments of that night. He closed the book and placed it on his chest, keeping a finger inside it as if he truly believed he would eventually get back to it.

He tried focusing on the money he would receive at the end of his adventure. HE thought about the cruise, the faraway island, the sun heating the silvery sand. Closing his eyes he tried to imagine th landscape as he always did, but… it was raining there, too. There was a cold, disturbing wind. No use in staying.

He opened his eyes and decided to watch some TV.

On the documentary channel there was a show about nuclear fission, while on the cinema channel an old american sci-fi movie had just started, from the fifties of the previous century. He chose the latter, and since he was quite hungry, decided to turn a late snack into an early supper.

The afternoon became evening, but he couldn't see the difference. He ate cheese-filled eggplants, absently watching the vicissitudes of a group of scientists fighting a clumsy but relentless tentacle monster. Once the alien was defeated, between flames and contortions, a french comedy started, giving him a good reason to change the channel.

The news, good. An elderly journalist was explaining the

exchange rates of the main foreign currencies, while various headlines passed in the lower part of the screen. Giovanni read them automatically, cutting off the woman. A soldier had saved a child who had fallen on the tracks. A school had won a literary price for the group project *Freedom and Future.* New appointments among the higher ups of the NMO. And then there was – curiously – something about politics-related disorders: *A revolt has been stopped in B***, 23 revolutionaries on trial*. Well, they weren't under his jurisdiction. They would be delivered to some other Keeper. Because that's how they would end. Unloaded. He had never watched an NMO trial, mainly because, for what he knew, they were conducted behind closed doors; but the suspected that the *Arrest, Trial, Conviction, Confinement, Unloading, Elimination* chain was rarely interrupted.

He wondered how many people, beyond the Camp's enclosure, were scheming in the shadows, plotting to overthrow the Order. They were probably demo-republican groups, who had disbanded with the coming of the NMO. In time, it was predictable they would try to reorganize and launch an attack. History is a book starting over at each chapter. Nothing new underneath the sun.

When the news ended, Giovanni changed the channel again and found a documentary on the production of japanese katanas. recognizing the first signs of digestion-induced sleepiness, he turn the volume down a bit and sat more comfortably on his chair, his hands on his lap.

Beyond the thick walls of his apartment, the storm went on. He could hear a crackling noise, interrupted now and then by seemingly faraway explosions, while in reality they were shaking the sky right above him.

A man wearing a garishly colored kimono was showing to the spectators the incision of the blade of a katana. Giovanni couldn't understand what he was saying, but he didn't really care anyway. He close his eyes.

Just a few seconds, he told himself.

His island was far. Like Japan. The thunders reminded him of the fireworks he so liked when he was a kid. He kept his father by one hand and his mother by the other, his nose up, filling his eyes with those loud blooms which then plummeted down, as it was said the firmament would do one day…

The sound of a sword cutting bamboo. Oriental music in the air. The sound of a gong, barely audible, under the rain, in the heart of the storm… how much could a katana cost? Almost as much as flying to a deserted island, maybe? Wasn't it *absurd*?

His head leaning on his chest, Giovanni loosened the reins. And his head galloped away in the night.

* * *

The sudden awakening was a blow to his heart.

The chair trembled due to his muscles contracting and his neck stood up painfully. The furious thunder that had ripped him from an already forgotten dream was still in the sky, rolling from one cloud to the other.

He instinctively brought one hand to his heart and pushed, almost as if he could placate it and keep it inside his chest.

From the dirty dish in from of him came the sugary smell of the sauce he had put on the eggplants, making him feel slightly nauseous. He spent an entire minute mentally rebuilding the context he was in and only after doing so he noticed something was wrong.

The TV was off, and so was the white ceiling light. The kitchen floated in a cold, ghostly light. He rubbed his eyes, blaming a momentary fogging of his sight. But he only needed to turn towards the point whence that new, cold light came to realize that the battery-powered emergency light had turned on. The power had gone out in the whole flat.

An alarm sounded in his brain. Did he need to follow any particular procedure? He remember something on the manual about what to do in case of a power outage.

In the meanwhile, rain kept scratching the Tank's walls. He went out of the kitchen and into the Control, vaguely disoriented from the new perspective and field of depth brought by that soporific whiteness. And he found confirmation to his suspicion: the Well, now, was only a dark rectangle on which the emergency lamp on the door frame reflected.

Nothing had changed for the convicts, of course. But he had responsibilities. His duty was to personally verify that there were no anomalies (and on their possible nature the manual was more than exhaustive) and to do so he had to check through the Porthole. Just so that he could write it on the Register.

He was about to do towards the reinforced door when a sudden idea made him go back. There was something he needed to take before leaving the apartment.

Once he had locked the door and got into the Ring, Giovanni stood still for about a minute, at a loss. The neon lamps were off and the emergency ones were on in their stead; but they were a lot less intense and numerous. As a result, the corridor was drowned in shadowy gulf barely lit by sporadic whitish, sickly halos. Droning, pounding noises and rumblings were everywhere… and also his heartbeat, which Giovanni thought he had managed to calm down, but was now going wild again.

Stevanich's question (*aren'tyouafraid?)* came back to haunt him, annoying like a mosquito. Had the General asked him the question in that precise moment he would still answer *no* (but that Adelfi or Adelchi wouldn't even need to see him to point out his lie).

The momentary confusion from the disquieting scene, however, dissipated quickly. And when he had calmed down, he closed the flat's door and walked rightwards, towards the Porthole.

Walking past the Shutter something scared him, so he coughed and hit his side with a fist to breath normally again. With the corner of his eye he had seen his reflection on the dark glass and the resulting illusion was something to cancel from his mind immediately.

The noises from outside made his steps very silent, almost inaudible. He felt as if he was levitating, moving at zero gravity in an surreal, curved tunnel that adapted to his altered perception. He was walking inside a dream, similar to a drug-induced trip. The emergency lamps were scant and at extremely far from each other – distances full of obscene possibilities – and between one another foggy areas of darkness reluctantly let themselves be crossed growling threats that were lost among the roaring thunders.

There was the emergency door, the Escape. The lamp set at its side faded from emerald green to olive. Exactly in front of it, on the inner wall of the Ring, there was the round window of metal and glass trough which Giovanni had never seen anything but his face deformed by opalescent reflections. But now, the Porthole shone. There was light on the other side. A feeble emergency light.

With his heart pounding in his chest he approached it, looked in it, scared, as if he was looking at the edge of another world… and it was like watching Hell itself through a telescope on the abyss.

He should have been used to it, since not a day passed with his not watching, at least for a few minutes, the agonizing convicts inside the Well. But that sort of surreal electronic phosphorescence made him think he was not looking at people, but lifeforms from another dimensions, beyond his space-time context. Now – however small and deformed – people stirred beneath him. They could be taken for extremely realistic dolls, human-shaped puppets contorting in a glass globe, and it would probably had been better to think so. But he had no intention to cheat himself: those were all men (*outcasts)* that he had personally dumped in the Tank. He felt no remorse: those tumors had to be removed. And he was no more than a scalpel in the hands of superior powers.

He stood there watching for a few minutes, and saw that everything was as usual. He could go back home and wait for the power to be on again. He would go to sleep, send a report the following morning, and then… and then…

His train of thought vanished in an hypnotic vapor. He was trying to think about what he had to do, but he couldn't. His head was filled with what he *wanted* to do.

Rain, thunder, rain…

He started at those slimy figures moving on the other side of the Porthole while trying to lead his mind to safer waters. But the current became strong, more impetuous. Fall into temptation was so much easier.

How much autonomy did the light's batteries have? He couldn't remember. And even if he did, he didn't know how long they had been on, so he couldn't predict when they would go off and leave him into the darkness.

He didn't have much choice. If he didn't do it in that moment, now that he had the right state of mind, maybe he would regret it later. So…

He could reach the shutter keeping on going counterclockwise, of course. But he preferred going retracing his steps. There was no reason for such a choice, if not the free will he had elected as his guide. It was instinct. And even if he had often taken for instinct the fruits of his paranoias, disguised as wise confidants, he felt it was the right time to indulge in that absurd whim. Nobody could see him, or at least nobody who could tell on him.

Once he reached the input panel he glanced apprehensively at his wristwatch under the light of the nearest lamp. he had lost track of time. No, midnight still hadn't passed. For 45 more minutes it would still be the 6th of July. That meant the Unlocking Code was still the same. He had used it three times, that day. He still remembered it.

He thought back to the emergency batteries activated when the power went off and remembered that the Shutter had one just for the opening and mechanisms, and the moving platform (a power outage during the Unloading process would be really bothersome). He was sure the buttons would be operative.

12. Asterisk.

Good. The palpitations were almost unbearable.

7. Asterisk.

His index finger trembled. Applying the right pressure was difficult with such a numb fingertip. Another thunder. Would the storm ever end? The shadowy parts of the Ring seemed to gasp, waiting.

6. The moment of truth.

Opening…

The door trembled for a second, then started sliding. Being powered by less energy, it took longer for it to open. Giovanni held his breath, and the Shutter was finally open before him, he felt a cramp in

his stomach and shivered. He had to thank his *good and sound health*, quoting the medical files, if is heart didn't explode.

What are you doing, Giovanni? Don't you think this is crazy? Or stupid?

No, he didn't think so. He was perfectly lucid, despite the dreamlike atmosphere, a fever-induced fantasy. It was something he had wanted to do for a long time. Nothing sick. A curiosity. Like when he listened to the convicts' voices. He hadn't done that on purpose, either; but since he still thought he did so while sleeping – something absolutely *sporadic* – he feared that maybe someday his psyche would lead him to satisfy that desire without consulting him. So…

How did it feel to stand inside the Shutter? Nobody who ever got in could then tell the tale.

Not that it was important, of course, but…

Even if it was formally forbidden, in a recess of Giovanni's mind he never excluded writing about it, someday. Tank about his experience. Write a book. A faraway day, of course. Or maybe never. The more emotions and experiences he could live through during his path, the more opportunities could come to him, one day, to exploit that adventure. History is a teacher. He was front-line witness, after all. He didn't want to betray. The vow was sacred to him. But in twenty, thirty years… who knew?

He took a step in.

The first thing that hit him was the dampening of any sound coming from outside.

Under his soles, the rubber platform welcomed him by bending slightly due to the rollers underneath; the illusion it had started moving was strong, even if just for a second, and Giovanni groaned, the sound bouncing darkly on the glass walls.

You really are crazy.

No, not at all. Reckless, maybe. But not crazy. He thought that maybe the Center knew about the Shutter's door being opened and that they would investigate as soon as they could. It wasn't really likely. But, in that case, he could give a plausible explanation. He was there to supervise. Was there anything wrong with him deciding to make sure the power outage hadn't damaged the mechanism? It could affect the following deliveries. No, he could explain everything.

He took another step in and put his hands on the walls of the suffering. The shutters vibrated, welcoming his open, sweaty palms.

And now, Giovanni… look.

Below him – six, seven meters away – the first layer of convicts tangled restlessly, a unstable mass of suffering bodies, a cauldron of pain, a maze of broken, bound, displaced limbs, among which stunned, beastly faces bloomed like rotten fungi. From above, a tired

light dripped on that small hell with deceiving, pale scratches, an undeniably fascinating continuous metamorphosis. It was useless to try and recognize somebody. Even those who had been unloaded that same day were already lost, absorbed, swallowed by that absurd, primordial human ooze.

Inside Giovanni's mind, dismayed by the vision, terror and fantasy flooded his brain. There was *grandeur* in what he was contemplating. He felt pervaded by a feeling he had never experienced before, but still he recognized it. It was as old as mankind itself. A feeling of unavoidability filling his brain, his blood, his nervous system. There was life, there, under his feet. The meaning of existence itself magnificently revealing to him, and he couldn't do anything but stare at it, let that state of inhuman grace expand, delate in his soul. And hadn't he resisted, his body – unable to contain it – would have exploded. Tears filled his eyes, unstoppable, unmotivated, and he felt dizzy trying to counter them.

He had to force himself to avert his gaze from that impossible, malignant universe, and closing his eyes he wondered what he would do if the Suffering was to suddenly open. How many – *just how many?* – had stood where he was and couldn't come back? But once there, the time for choosing was over. There, on the Shutter's moving platform, all the possible ways out were closed, except one.

Leaning on his arms, Giovanni distanced himself from the door, moving backwards with difficulty, knowing he had to immediately escape from that absurd emotional flood. He swore under his breath, feeling betrayed by his own feelings. Focused as he was on the need to tear away those thoughts hanging from his brain like cobwebs (*what would you do before an open Suffering?)*, only at the last moment did he hear the noise behind his back.

He turned around, shocked by fear, and his legs gave away. He fell backwards, in the Shutter, lying on the platform. His right arm went numb from hitting the floor with his elbow, while the back of his head hit the surface of the Suffering. His heart screamed, but from his mouth only a muffled sound came out, almost a wail.

It wasn't an illusion this time. he wasn't imagining it. There was *someone* out there, in the Ring.

Standing against the feeble light of the emergency lamps, half hidden beyond the doorstep, was a shadowy silhouette, a fragment of darkness in human form. It was standing still, the contours drawn by the weak luminescence behind its back, and it looked like he was watching the Keeper lying in the Shutter, waiting to take a decision.

"Who…" Giovanni had to get more air in his lungs to make himself audible. "*Who are you?*"

He didn't really expect the shadow to answer him, so he wasn't

surprised by it remaining silence.

"What…?" His tongue deserted him, reluctant to obeying his brain. A mental ravine filled his head with a chaos of frantic thoughts.

What do I have to do?

A sudden movement from the shadow caused him to feel pins and needles on the back of his head, already in pain for the blow. Did he raise an arms, the right one, partially hidden from his view? He had brought it to…

Terror blocked his throat. He didn't just brought it to the input push-button panel, *did he*?

A light shone in a recess of Giovanni's mind. He had to. Yes, he absolutely had to…

He started searching with the still numb fingers of his right hand. He felt pain, but he couldn't give up: it was his only hope.

It was then that the black shape spoke. It did so with a clearly altered voice, a coarse whisper like a rusty needle. Maybe he had an handkerchief on his mouth. "I need but press a button."

Giovanni's fingers found what they were looking for, while torpor slowing them down started turning to fire. His blood was scalding and flowed at an extreme speed.

The metal safety. He needed to switch it off.

"Just one button…" the shadow went on.

But that distressing whisper was interrupted when Giovanni, lying inside the Shutter, extended an arm. In his hand, the gun he had thought about bringing with him at the last minute reflected the trembling emergency light. He was shaking, that much was obvious. But he couldn't miss at that distance.

"You are dead."

He didn't waste any more time, nor breath.

The intruder predicted, probably from the tone with which Giovanni had spoken, he would really pull the trigger. He jumped backwards, out of the firing line, but wasn't quick enough, and to the detonation a muffled whimpering followed. The shot, amplified by the Shutter's walls, was like a bomb. Giovanni tried to frantically stand up as fast as he could. Clenching his teeth, his head a cauldron of pulsating pain, he briefly thought about the senseless human amoeba; *it* had surely heard everything too, and the Keeper imagined the multitude of eyes staring upwards.

He quickly rolled out of the Shutter with such force he almost crashed on the opposite wall of the Ring. He heard steps running beyond the turn. Did he get him? It looked like it. From how he had jumped back, before disappearing, he probably hit him in his left shoulder.

Keeping the Beretta aimed forward, ready to shoot again, he

cautiously started following him. Fear had been suffocated by adrenalin, replaced by a frenzy he had never felt before (*nemomeimpunelacessit*). His survival instinct was inciting him, shouting to be on guard, but not let his prey get away. Ahead he went, walking along the wall at a fast pace, from one area of darkness to the next. Sweat irritated his eyes; he wiped them away with an angry gesture of the arm. Where did that bastard think he was going? Did he really believe he could reach the elevator and escape before being caught? Well, good luck then! He could also stop and wait for him, crouching in the shadows, ready to attack him. But Giovanni was ready, too. He would shoot the first thing he saw moving and all his senses were more alert than ever before.

Traces could be seen on the linoleum floor. Water stains. Wet prints.

Another thunder. It was strangely loud, considering the storm should be farther away now. Then a cold current came, a sudden and refreshing wind. Giovanni stopped, trying to understand the nature of that unexpected fall in temperature. The sweat on his forehead froze in an instant.

He needed but take one more step to understand everything.

The Escape was open. From the black, shining rectangle of night inside the green metal frame a cold current slapped him inside the copious rain.

“Damn him…”

He ran to the doorstep, not caring about the water biting him with myriads of icy teeth. With a hand on the small railing he looked down. A set of rungs went down towards the base of the Tank, disappearing after just a few meters in the dark and howling throat of the night.

“Coward!” He screamed towards the black void in which the ladder plummeted. “You’re nothing but a coward!”

He felt the impulse to shoot again. He aimed his Beretta towards the bottom of the ladder, in a vertical line, and imagined the bullet hitting whoever was descending in the center of his head. But then? In what mess would he get himself? He knew he had to justify each bullet. Until then it was self-defense and he knew nobody could blame him; but now, had he shot a man on the run, whoever he was, he would be less defendable. Not worth it.

He relaxed his arm, listening to the thunders rumbling and slowly drifting southwards.

“Coward…” he said again, but with less conviction. He was drenched and cold. The primitive furor that had possessed him was gone. As were the lights of the lamps behind him. He raised his head, still on the edge of the abyss, looking at an inexistent horizon. The

world outside the Tank was a dark ocean, an impenetrable curtain that the rain, however insistent it could be, could not dissipate.

A weird thought came to his mind. *Is there still something beyond this silo of steel and concrete planted in a corpse-drenched soil?*

It was an interesting thought, but an inappropriate one. He had to go back in. Both because his duty not to stay outside the Tank without a good reason and because he seriously risked getting sick.

A last, childish look under his feet, then he went back inside and closed the green door with a pound thud.

But how did he open it?

With a key, of course. Whoever had gotten in had one. Someone with access to a copy and the terminal from which he had sent his pathetic threats in the past.

He holstered his Beretta, then took the keys out of his left pocket, making sure the small metal tetragram wouldn't get caught in the thread of his pants. Once closing the Escape – no name could be more appropriate in that particular moment – Giovanni leant on it with his back. He needed a break. Even just a minute to catch his breath and calm down the chaos boiling in his head before the emergency light, which were now struggling, left him in the dark.

Had he really been about to die? To be *unloaded*? Or was it a bluff? It was impossible to say. He would report the following day. He would tell everything.The NMO would catch the person that tried to kill him. There was a wounded man in Camp 9. He no doubt left lots of traces.

He moved away from the cold, green door – beyond which the night went on, indifferent to his frustration – and started walking. The cold trails he had followed running outside the Shutter weren't as knitted as before. He proceeded close to the wall on his left in order not to step on the blood that probably fell on the floor while the intruder ran away. If the wound was deep enough. Blood could give precious information on his persecutor's identity.

But he would check the following day. It was impossible to investigate in that particular moment. Thinking about what happened, or what could have happened, nauseated him. An irresistible idea had carved a path in his brain: go to bed and disappear. Go off. Draw a red line on that day. That's what he would do.

He struggled a bit trying to insert the apartment key into the lock. Once he was inside and had closed the door, the strong smells coming from the kitchen and the almost utter darkness disoriented so much he crashed into the coat hanger. His reflexes and some clumsy footwork helped him to avoid falling together with the wooden piece of furniture. Had he really fallen, he would probably just have stayed there on the ground for the rest of the night. He used his last energy to

take off his shoes, water-and-sweat-drenched trousers and shirt, then threw them into the darkness. He heard the wet noise of his clothes together with something more massive. He remembered that his pistol and holster were still attached to his belt, but he lacked the will to take care of it. Let them stay there. It was fine with him.

He had to take the shower, but the emergency lamps were now nests of dying fireflies. Moving without damaging something or hurting himself was impossible. Night itself had seeped into the apartment through invisible pores in the walls.

He reached his bed, helped by the dim light coming from the window, and fell on it face first, with a groan. He felt so exhausted he couldn't resist his worst thoughts, the ones his brain focused on when it felt his self-control slip away.

He imagined the intruder coming back to the Tank and into the apartment, pick up the Beretta, still abandoned among his wet clothes, aim it to his temple, pull the trigger, then put it in his hand to simulate suicide.

Everyone would think he couldn't make it, the poor thing.

He couldn't bear the Tank. He didn't resist. He looked so strong, so…

He imagined all this while already floating, weightless, between wake and dream, and wasn't surprised to think that if that really happened with him aware of it, maybe he wouldn't raise a finger to stop him.

18 – Questions Without Answers

He woke up with a start at 5:43 A.M.. The voices had pulled him out of his dream. One was male, deep, grave, and one was female, polite and light.

Only a few seconds earlier Giovanni was still standing before the open Escape, facing a storm that, however violent, couldn't move him. The landscape expanding under his eyes was terrifying, surreal. An infinite expanse of corpses, as far as the eye could see. The whole Camp 9 was filled with corpses, but not all were immobile, no. Some were trembling, here and there. Some were still breathing and tried escaping his unavoidable doom. Giovanni contemplated that apotheosis of pain and deaf, terrified, yet intimately sure he was the chosen one, the untouchable one, privileged. The Tank protected him from harm. It was his fortress, his whole life. Then perceived the vibration, a diffused tremor, accompanied by a sinister crackling.

It's the universe's foundations, he thought.

And in that moment the mass of corpses started moving, a waving, sinuous surface, arched by invisible underground protrusions. Giovanni tried to get away from the Escape's doorstep, but the charm of that view had an immense, trampling power. He couldn't step back, not even when the Tank started bending forward in a barely noticeable, yet unstoppable way. His hands were clenched around the green mental steps, he tried to shout, but the storm shove the shout right back into his throat. There was no hope for the Tank. The enormous circular structure was lost. And while Giovanni fell with it, all the bodies obscuring the land raised their arms to welcome him…

He opened his left eye and saw his wrist and watch. The right eye was buried in the pillow. In his head, the echo of the falling Tank still hadn't gone silent, and so the scare.

He had no time to completely wake up, nor to get over the devastating effect of that morning nightmare, because a new sensory solicitation, way more real, needed his attention.

Two people were talking. There, *in his apartment.* A man and a woman. He didn't understand what they were saying, but it was his duty to immediately get up and go deal with whatever it could be. It didn't look like they were plotting something and he didn't hear any signs of tension or threat. For what he could hear, they were in the kitchen.

A pink dim light got in from the window, the placid light of dawn rounding every corner and making it soft and relaxing. Giovanni sat on the edge of his bed, but the change in blood pressure made his head spin and the room rotated some degrees. He decided it would be

helpful to close his eyes for a few seconds, keep his breathing under control and wait for the heart to get back to working correctly. But when he felt ready and about to get up to go find out who had gotten in his flat, he realized he was only wearing his underwear and socks. However anomalous the situation, it wasn't appropriate to go check dressed like that with a woman in the room. Apart from the embarrassment, there was the possibility that they had been sent by the NMO: they weren't hiding their presence and were maybe waiting for him to get up. But… at that time?

He quickly took a night-gown our of his wardrobe without worrying about the door creaking. He noticed a second of silence in the kitchen, then the voices started talking again. They probably heard him. Maybe the man said something funny, as the woman laughed before commenting herself.

Giovanni got his gun from the pile of clothes on the floor, put on his slippers and, hiding the Beretta under his back, appeared on the kitchen's doorstep. He was ready for anything, but not for what he saw. And a painful migraine punished him instantly for his stupidity.

He still hadn't noticed that all the light were now on. And so was the TV.

In the screen, a young journalist and very elegant old man were talking in a studio. The camera focused on one, then the other, and it sufficed to follow just a couple of sentences to understand it was an interview. He was a nazi hierarch, or something like that.

Dragging his feet and pressing a finger on his temple Giovanni grabbed the remote and made both disappear, annoyed. It was all clear now. What an imbecile!

He sat at the table, which was still set from the night before, but the mere sight of the dish, oily and smelling of hot sauce, made him sick. He stood up, growling some vulgarity, and went to the bathroom. He swallowed a couple of painkillers, took a warm shower, dressed up, then dragged himself to the Control.

Everything appeared to be in order inside the Well. The greenish image of the agonizing convicts went back to its professional routine that made him keep his usual balanced emotive detachment. Good.

The Postman was silent. Everything good on that front, too. It was too soon to receive messages or faxes. But that day he would be the one to take the first time, and very early, too.

He sat in front of the screen, rubbed his hands and, without beating around the bush, he started writing his report to the officers in the Center. His headache was disappearing.

Thanks to the chemical first-aid, he thought with mock satisfaction. Moreover, the strict mental training he went under in these last few months let his cut with efficiency the umbilical cord binding to the

nightmare he had made, so he couldn't remember it. It was useless, very useless, to think about it. There was a time when he would think about it for half a day. But not now. No more dead weights. A clean mind!

"I am the NMO."

Yeah, right. A piercing titter slipped away from a corner of his mouth. *You are the NMO, and you are also an idiot who cant tell two talking people in the TV from intruders…*

That was really a good one. It would be a funny chapter in the memoir he would write. One day.

He shook his head to forget those inanities and focused on what he was writing. Once finished, he double-checked.

"*Esteemed Sirs, I have to signal a serious incident happened in the evening of yesterday, the 6th of July. Alerted by a power outage I proceeded with all the necessary inspections, opening the door of the isolation cabin to check. During the inspection I was blindsided by an intruder, impossible to identify due to the reduced visibility caused by the emergency lights being almost out of battery. Since he manifested homicidal intents, I was forced to shoot (a single bullet). Wounded, probably in his left shoulder, the intruder escaped using the escape door form which I think he got in, considering the impossibility to do so with the elevator. My attempt to catch him had a negative outcome. I still haven't cleaned the floor should there be the need to analyze the blood trails. I await directions. Respectfully."*

Bureaucratic slang had always irritated him. But now, so spontaneously coming from his head, he found it ridiculous. It was a very good report: dry, short, exemplary. It was a pity he couldn't communicate the enormous emotional impact of what happened. But what could he write? Passions and emotions had very little influence when information was communicated to those levels. The only important thing was to be dutiful. And be sincere, when possible. Ok, he didn't get inside the Shutter for an inspection, not technically anyway; but he also had to protect himself, didn't he? Ok, that was good.

He sent the message with a sigh.

He then looked into the Well. How strange… had the intruder pushed a button the night before (*a simple pressure of the finger on a plastic circle!*), then now he too would…

He stood up, annoyed by the direction his thoughts had taken, refusing to let them go on. He just needed to kill some time before getting an answer from the fax machine or the Postman. He wasn't hungry, so he decided that breakfast could wait. Going back to bed was out of the question. Reading? Some TV? No, thanks. He thought (*they would have found out you weren't there, see that you were in the*

Tank, activated some kind of device to take you out, they would they would they would) he could shave, in all tranquillity, watching his face disappeared from the mirror behind a layer of vapor.

Dragging his feet he started walking towards the bathroom (*if the people under there recognized you they would have dragged you down, nobody would have ever found you, you would have gotten eaten!*), but a sudden *beep* blocked him on the Control's threshold.

An answer already?

He went back to the Postman and, biting his lip, opened the message.

"*You are authorized to clean everything up. The intruder has been caught and awaits judgment.*"

His first reaction was to land his fist on the console.

"Great!" He exclaimed. But the enthusiasm so vigorously blooming inside him was immediately ruined by a hideous interior voice: *And what if he's the one writing you? Would it really be so unlikely?*

True… if the man that had gotten inside the Tank was the same who had written those rambling threats (and he was, without a doubt), then he could really be…

"Oh to hell with it!" It was crazy talk. How could anyone be sure of anything when in there, unaware of anything happening in the outside world? Had he to trust the message and clean up the water and blood in the Ring, or was it some kind of deceit? The uncertainty made him feel helpless. He realized he was biting one of his knuckles and his teeth had already left pale moons on his skin.

He thought he should probably answer somehow, and did so with the extremely vague hope he could strengthen his trust in whoever was communicating with him. He wrote: "*As injured party, can I know the identity of the man you arrested?*"

"I'll cut my hand off if they do…"

The answer arrived after just 20 seconds.

"*When the time is right. Have a good day, Keeper.*"

There it was. Exactly how he feared. That *Have a good day, Keeper* was the end of the conversation. Answering would be useless. He would do what he had been told to and if had indeed all been a trick, the printouts would confirm his good faith, and most of all his obedience.

He grabbed a bucket and a mop, and went to the Ring, cursing the migraine trying to conquer his head.

* * *

Two triple deliveries, that day. One at 9:00 A.M. (drunken nomads stopped while riving a stolen car, and one at 4:00 P.M. (revolutionaries found in possession on unregistered weapons).

Giovanni tried to ask the guards, both in the morning and in the afternoon, trying to get something out of them by using generic questions such as “Any problem with the storm, yesterday?” or “Anything new out there?” They were good attempts, even if a bit pathetic, and altogether useless. In one case (It was Wrinkle) the answer was “No problems” and the other (Bags) “Everything all right, Keeper” (and Giovanni had learnt that when a GS ended the sentence with the work *Keeper* it was more of a *shut up and remember your place*). He didn’t resent the soldiers’ silence. He knew their *modus operandi* and also that they had received orders they couldn’t disobey. He decided thing would take their own course, as always, under the management of a superior system. The NMO would decide what he should come to know, when, and how.

“Ok,” he told himself, staring at his reflection in the mirror. “I knew it wouldn’t be easy, so I don't want to complain. I’m halfway there. Let’s keep going.”

* * *

And so he did. With the deliveries, readings, exercise, television…

No surprises, no intrusions and no dreams too horrible to be forgotten. He expected a second visit from doctor Nicastro, or from Alex, just to have a chat beyond the usual formalities.

The Tank kept grinding the days, under the rain and the sun, an immense concrete spider on an invisible web, a place where all the threads of sin, transgression, crime and degradation converged. Fatally. Inexorably. And Giovanni Corte, zealous Keeper and watcher, had to wait the end of July to get answers for the many questions corroding his heart.

19 – Confessions

The fax arriving in the morning of July 21st presented, for the first time since the beginning of the year, an anomaly.

There were three deliveries. Two triple ones in the afternoon and a single one in the morning. Giovanni thought it was a weird subdivision. But he still couldn't know how weird would that lone morning delivery.

First, where the name of the convict should have been written, there was only an ID: 150552-MO. A military ID. As for the accusation, it was *Treason*. He would arrive at 8:30 A.M.. Giovanni felt his heart sink. He would probably finally meet his enemy.

He skipped breakfast, or at least postponed it. He wasn't hungry. He preferred looking outside the window, his eyes on the faraway built up area called the Center.

A van appeared from the small scrub hiding a parking lot and took the road (*the spider web)* to the Tank.

It's time.

He straightened his shirt, checked the holster, centered the buckle of his belt, got out of his apartment and stopped next to the Shutter. He coughed a couple of times, then tried to talk ("I am the NMO") to verify the stability of his voice. It was alright. Yes, he was ready. Ot at least, he thought he was.

There was the buzz, the noise of the steel cables, the cabin slowing down, stopping…

He took a deep breath, expanding his chest, thinking he could maybe assimilate some energy and get stronger. But when the doors opened and he saw general Stevanich get out of the elevator, he almost dropped his clipboard. His hands did their best to strengthen their grip, but the joints of his fingers seemed to have melt like butter under the sun.

Despite being a civilian, he immediately saluted him.

"Good morning, general!"

Stevanich, in his high uniform, quickly brought a finger to the eyeshade of his hat. "Good morning, Keeper Corte."

Giovanni hoped he looked impeccable, martial, but his heartbeat and breathing were plotting to destroy that semblance of balance. His brain contracted like a sponge, producing an infinity of questions. But he didn't have the time to be surprised as behind the general there was Alex, followed by Scalp.

While three were heading towards him, towards the Shutter, Giovanni noticed two sinisterly clarifying details. Scalp had his rifle. Alex had his hands tied behind his back and was looking down.

Oh God, no…

"I appreciate the fact that you could manage the situation with discretion, mister Corte." The general started. "You didn't create unnecessary tensions nor divulged important information."

Giovanni listened to those words trying to keep a proud look – *appropriately* proud – even if he wasn't sure he was following. However, he decided it was appropriate to answer just by moving his head in a nod. He noticed, right behind the general's head, that Alex had raised his head and was staring at him. He tried not cross his gaze.

"You surely know", Stevanich went on "that high officers don't usually run deliveries, except when the convict is part of the military."

"Of course…"

"And that my presence here, this morning, is justified by the fact that we are about to unload Alex Allevi." He didn't even turn towards the young man he was talking about and Giovanni didn't dare avert his gaze from Stevanich's hard face to find out what facial expression was altering the prisoner's face. "He was arrested the night he returned to the Center after incursion you reported. His confusional state and the superficial wound on his left shoulder made him very suspicious. I personally followed the interrogation and after two days we managed to get a complete confession. A confession…" He took a piece of paper, which had been folded four times, out of his pocket and opened it "…convict Allevi will now read out loud."

After saying this, he stepped aside. Scalp touch Alex's back with the barrel of his 13-S and the latter stepped forward. At that point it was inevitable for Giovanni to meet his gaze.

Alex looked a bit paler and also thinner than the last time they met. His lips trembled slightly, telling a tale of emotional devastation and terror. Was it entreaty, what he was seeing in his eyes? Or shame? Giovanni coughed to hide a hiccup. And went back to staring at the general.

Stevanich, without ever looking at the convict's face, extended his arm towards him with the typewritten document and said: "Read it, Allevi."

Alex breathed corals. A drop of mucus shone under one nostril. His pupils started going up and down the document, trying to focus on the writing. Then the trembling lips separated and his throat reluctantly started exhaling. "I… Alex Allevi…"

Giovanni shivered hearing that broken scarping pretending to be a voice.

"Confess to have conducted a series of… actions driven by feelings of resentment… and envy towards Giovanni Corte, Keeper of Tank 9…"

Giovanni felt needles sinking under the skin of his arms and legs.

Alex looked up, trying to met Giovanni's eyes with his. The Keeper did the same, astonished.

"Go on, Allevi!" The general's voice was a whiplash in the Ring's silence.

Only then did Giovanni realize that the convict hadn't been sedated. However physically and mentally dejected he could feel, he totally lacked the resigned detachment, the lethargy that the Keeper had seen in all the convicts. Alex was lucid. They probably denied him that one solace. Lucid, and desperately aware of what awaited him.

"…in January of the current year I wrote what I wanted to be mistaken for the previous Keeper's memoir… describing experiences and episodes that could induce negative feelings into Corte…"

(*Unbelievable!*)

"…I got inside the Tank at night using the elevator and I knocked to trick Corte into exiting the apartment. I knew he would go to isolation cabin to check it, as per regulations, so I hid behind the turn on the other side and spied his movements. He left the door open and walked away in the hallway, so I had the opportunity…" He caught his breath for a moment, then licked his lips to dampen them "…to hide the manuscript under the mattress, hoping he would find it sooner or later…"

Giovanni couldn't take his eyes off the dry mouth reading that, hypnotized by the the words coming out of it, bewildered by the revelations amassing in a corner of his mind, ready to be later re-examined in all their horror.

"…my goal was to… induce him to quit his job in the Tank. job I would get as the second in rank during selections…"

While Alex was reading, Giovanni noticed Stevanich was observing him. The general – who still held the piece of paper in his hand, immobile like a statue – kept his eyes on him, a look as piercing as the cuspids of his tetragram. He felt the need to swallow what little saliva he had left in his mouth, but he knew that his occluded throat would make his neck move grotesquely; he decided to avoid it.

"…when it became evident that after a few month Corte still hadn't noticed the material…"

(*Oh, how wrong you are, mate…*)

"…I abusively used the terminal in the Center when it was unmanned and made him find the manuscript to… to scare him in such a way that it would decrease the quality of work…"

(*Poor, poor Alex. I feel nothing but pity and disgust…)*

"In the early hours of the 7th of the current month I stole from the archive a copy of the key that grants access to the Tank through the security door and, entering the structure masked in order to…

scare Corte, I found him while he was inspecting…"

"That's enough, Allevi." The general retracted his arm and folded the signed confession, putting it back into his pocket. Alex stood there with a half-open mouth, the dumb expression of somebody who just lost something. "I think you know the rest, Corte."

Giovanni nodded, suddenly shaken from the anguishing speech.

"I want you to know that this public reading was essentially for your benefit, Corte. You had to the right to get some answers. Did you ?"

Giovanni nodded again, but Stevanich's frowning face suggested him to answer appropriately. "Yes, general, sir. Thank you."

"Let's think of this regrettable matter as a closed one, then. You may proceed."

Alex grimaced, emitting a sob filled with repressed tears. He then advanced abruptly, pushed by Scalp's weapon.

Giovanni stepped to the push-button panel. He then raised the clipboard and looked for the Unlocking Code. He felt his stomach twitch. Things were happening so fast…

Maybe it was better that way. Emotions had already had enough space: they now had to be caged, buried. There was no chance the general would change his mind or that the sentence could be discussed. He would be the first to try and talk about it, maybe; explain his point of view, ask if the punishment really was commensurate to the crime. But he was no lawyer. He was the Keeper of the Tank (*and the executioner)*, and he would only end up with Stevanich not thinking well about him anymore. On the other hand, that poor devil had committed to many infractions and him being part of the NMO's army made it all way less forgivable.

His fingers moved on the buttons with clockwork efficiency under the general's stony gaze. And in was probably the fact that he felt observed, together with the emotional chaos contracting his abdominals, that lead him into making a mistake.

The scarlet spy on the upper part of the panel lit up intermittently. Giovanni's heart skipped a beat; the back of his head started burning, then the heat went down the neck and to his cheeks. Right when the general was staring at him, for the first time since he worked at the Tank, after hundreds of unloadings, he had gotten the code wrong.

His instinct made him turn towards Stevanich, who didn't move a muscle.

"I apologize, general…" His voice barely came out, cracked like Alex's. He had input the UC as it was written on the fax, shamefully forgetting the date, so he pressed the RESET button while trying not to tremble too much, and started over. While inputting the code, a

window opened his brain to show him what it had caught when he had turned first towards the general, then back to the panel. On Scalp's face a grin had appeared, on Alex's an absurd hope: if case of three consecutive wrong inputs during the opening process, the convict's punishment would be suspended.

I know what you are thinking, Alex. But I can't do it, and you know it.

He pressed each button with extreme caution. The certainty of doing everything correctly pervaded him like a white fire even before the Shutter's door opened.

"Go!" Stevanich's exhortation made the convict move to the threshold of that small vestibule of Hell more than Scalp's 13-S.

Please don't look at me, Giovanni thought, *Don't look at me now!*

And yet, as he feared, before stepping on the mobile platform Alex raised his head and stared at him dead in the eyes. "I would never have…" he whispered. "I would never have pushed the button…"

Giovanni felt burning coal between his corneas and eyelids.

He could only nod.

"You will, won't you?"

Giovanni stopped nodding. It was the only way he managed to say *yes*.

Alex smiled bitterly and, closing his eyes and clenching his teeth, stepped forward.

"Close it, Corte!" The general, who still hadn't stopped staring at him, wanted to sever possible any emotional thread.

Giovanni pressed the Closing button, holding his breath.

A hiss, a slight vibration, and the dark glass of the door cut Alex's shape from view. But before he disappeared completely, Giovanni could see him bend his neck forward and almost touch his chest with his chin. He immediately understood his intentions. It was the ideal position to plummet and hope to break his neck.

I hope you make it, he thought.

He then pressed the Unloading button and, staring right in front of him, listened to the buzzing of the moving platform.

He mentally counted to thirteen and pressed again, trying not to think about what he had done. Useless. Even silence, now, was filled by the scream he couldn't hear.

Stevanich turned towards Scalp and with a simple nod ordered him to move towards the elevator. The Guard obeyed immediately. Then the general turned back towards Giovanni, who was standing still, hands behind his back, legs slightly spread. Like a soldier at ease.

"You did a good job, Corte."

"Thank you, general. I'm sorry for that mistake…"

“Don’t make it twice more.”

“I’ll do my best to avoid it, general.”

The two stared at each other for a few more seconds. Then Stevanich suddenly asked him that famous question: “So, Corte… aren’t you *afraid*?”

Giovani hesitated. When he opened his mouth, his lips moved as if he was saying something. But it all remained inside his head.

Stevanich once more turned towards Scalp, waiting like a sentinel in front of the elevator’s door. “You can go, Guard. Wait for me downstairs.”

A click of the heels, fingers at his forehead, and Scalp disappeared from the ring.

The general, who still hadn’t moved his feet from where he first planted them, turned back towards the Keeper. He simply raised an eyebrow, and it was like he was asking:

So?

Giovanni – who in the meanwhile had searched inside his head and found in Scalp’s departure an incentive to speak more sincerely – answered: “Yes, general, I was. And I will probably have again in the future.”

Stevanich slowly chewed on those words as if they were tobacco. “Of course, Corte. We are human. It’s impossible not to, isn’t it?”

Giovanni felt light-headed for a second. He still hadn’t eaten anything, had just executed the only person he thought to be his friends and now general Aurelio Stevanich in person was engaging him in a private conversation with slightly surreal tones. He had to be steadfast and show he could keep up.

“I think it’s impossibile, general.”

“Yes, it. Do you know why I ask you this question, Corte? Or better, why I ask you again?”

“I’m afraid not, general.”

“Because our work lives on fear. Without fear, the New Moral Order couldn’t stand. I feel it a lot, Corte. Consider it a confidence. I *always* feel it. Everyone do. You, Corte, just answered me by saying you were afraid, and you will be again. Past and future. But mow, in this precise moment… can you say in all honesty you don’t feel fear’s presence at each and every heartbeat? Think about it.”

Giovanni was listening trying to pay the utmost attentions, keeping away all the other thoughts (*Did Alex manage to die?*) barking in his head like rabid dogs kept at bay by way too think chains. Why was the general telling him all those things? And why in that moment, when he knew that his clarity was compromised by everything that had just happened? But maybe that’s what he wanted: open his mind when it was particularly fragile and vulnerable. Than man had to be a

skilled psyche manipulator, other than an inflexible man of charge.

(*Or maybe he's a madman. Eh? You never thought about it?*)

"Did you understand what I just asked you, Corte?"

A twitch in his stomach. Mutating shadows on the edges of his eyes. "Of course general. And… you're right."

"About what?"

"On the fact that… I'm afraid. Even now."

"And of what? Can you precisely tell me what the object of your fear is?"

What was apparently born as an informal conversation had rapidly become a true interrogation. Or a ruthless psychoanalysis. Giovanni took some seconds, while the other was piercing his head with his eyes. He finally answered:

"No, general."

Stevanich breathed a satisfied smirk through his nose. "Just as I thought. We now live in a world where everything scares us. We are surrounded by fear. we reached a point where we don't even recognize it anymore. So we face it day by day without knowing. What were you doing inside the Shutter, Corte, on the night of July 7th?"

That question hit him like a wrecking ball. The plastic clipboard he kept in his hands with an increasingly weak hold fell with a sudden, dry thud on the linoleum floor. He was about to turn around and pick it up, but the general voice froze him: "Leave it there, and answer me. What were you doing?"

Giovanni gasped. "I… as I wrote on the report… the power went out… I was inspecting…"

"Right, you were inspecting."

Giovanni interpreted that condescending comment as an invitation to stop lying. So he just shut up.

"You see, Corte, when the power goes out the emergency batteries take its place. And were there any anomaly in the system, you know that your attention would be drawn by the light and sound alarms. You know it, don't you?"

"Yes, general, sir, I know. But…"

"Entering the Shutter is very dangerous. A contact, a tension drop, and probably you wouldn't be here talking to me, know."

Giovanni felt the sweat running down his spine. "You are right, general. It was… an imprudence."

"I think… or better, I suppose… it was curiosity. Correct me if I'm wrong."

Denying it was useless. It would just be offensive. "You're not wrong general. I used the emergency lights to… to look inside. I apologize officially for…"

“No need, Corte, no need. You didn’t commit any infraction. You are authorized to move as you please, here. Within the limits you are aware of naturally. And tell me: have you satisfied your… *curiosity*?”

Giovanni was sure he was sharing the same feelings of those who found themselves before Vlad the Impaler, undecided on which question to give in order to get away with their lives. But now that he had chosen sincerity…

“Yes. It was enough, general.”

Stevanich stroked his black mustache. “And what did you feel, when that criminal tricked you into believing he would activate the mechanism?”

A nervous smile contracted Giovanni’s cheeks, he didn’t even have to think about it. He was in it deep now, so it was better to be honest and direct. “I was scared shitless.”

The silence that followed lasted exactly thirteen seconds. Giovanni counted them. He had given a very informal answer, but he didn’t think he could get into trouble. He was not part of the military. And in no way had he been disrespectful.

When Stevanich spoke, Giovanni understood the torture was over, the grate turned off. “Well said, Corte. *Scared shitless.* No beating around the bush. So… I’ll leave you to your duties. And don’t think about what you did too much. It was simply your duty, nothing less. And eat something, you look a bit pale.”

“Yes, general, sir.”

Stevanich turned around, went to the elevator, pressed the button that called it, waited for it to arrive, stared at the opening doors…

All this while Giovanni followed his every movement, as rigid as a tree trunk, sweating, shaking. He knew perfectly well that the general would add something before disappearing. There was a sort of script behind that conversation. As if those things had been said to others before him.

To give confirmation to his feeling, Stevanich turned around and stared at his for a few seconds before saying: “Remember that fears must be faces, Corte. We all have to do it sooner or later. There is no escape.”

Giovanni saluted and clicked his heels.

And the maws of the elevator swallowed the general.

* * *

Once back in his apartment Giovanni went to kitchen to eat some cookies and drink pineapple juice. His esophagus seemed to have shrunk, so he had to swallow with insistence. He had lived through

what he thought had been the worst thirty minutes of his life. He felt exhausted, with a burning fever. The general's words had fallen on his brain like acid rain and almost managed to impair the horror Alex's tragic confession and execution.

Suddenly, the idea of that man thrown into the arms of death made him want to check the Well. He staggered to the Control and, with his arms on the console, brought his face to just a few centimeters from the screen and looked hard.

He checked the faces floating on the surface one by one, but they were too small. He then activated the *zoom* function (he had done that once already, to understand how it worked, but the abundance of details had disgusted him). Using the small joystick to move the camera, he glided like an invisible vulture over the mass of dying bodies. He recognized some of those he unloaded one or two days earlier: they gasped, eyes open or closed; they talked, cried, laughed. He saw a man screaming, his bent backwards, his neck exposed to whoever wanted to bite it in the dark. Another one, his nose pressed against the wall, was laughing maniacally. A third one, with only his chest emerging, looked upwards and shook his head left as right, as if he wanted to state a strong dissent.

But there was no trace of Alex. They had already pulled him down (*Dead? Still Alive?*). Of course he could just watch the recording, should he want to hurt himself. Out of curiosity. Again, and always, *curiosity*. No. He wouldn't. No…

He barely managed to run to the bathroom. With a chocked groan he bent over the toilet and vomited what little he had eaten.

* * *

He spent the day in a state of half-lethargy. He zealously supervised the deliveries and effortlessly unloaded assassins, scammers and perverts. But his head was flying elsewhere, and he didn't understand if it was too high or too low. He felt detached from what he was doing, as if a dark glass (*the Shutter's?*) was separating him from a part of himself, from the daily life around him.

He couldn't read nor watch TV. He tried, of course, just to verify whether his mind could get some new ideas, gravitate around alternative fulcrums. But he was rapidly convinced of the uselessness of his efforts. He went to bed early and stared at the ceiling with wide open eyes.

Up there, clusters of shadows started staging all the main events of the day: a sinister show put on by his mind to torment him with replicas of the day's worst moments over and over again.

That damn *Keeper's diary* was all a trick, then. A goddamn *hoax*. The manuscript that had troubled him so much was nothing but a ruse from that wretch and he had spent hours among doubts, remorses, uncertainties, fears. And what for? To get to that point. To regret the time and energies he had thrown away. He should have been offended for how he was fooled in such a stupid way. But he just felt embittered. For how everything had come to an end. Was it possible that a you man – intelligent, educated, with an already more than commendable job – could stoop so low on a moral level? And for what then? For envy? Of what? The money he would get at the end of the year? Ok, it was a tempting perspective, but… could it really justify such folly?

Moreover, now that he thought about it, he probably didn't confess everything he had done. The fact the had access to a copy of the keys, for example, made him suppose he was the one who had "mysteriously" turned the audio channel on in the middle of the night. At the time, Giovanni had blamed himself; but now, in the light of all those revelations, he started thinking it was an unconfessed incursion by Alex, rather than an unpleasant and isolated episode of sleep-walking.

Shadows, over shadows, over shadows…

He wanted to cry. It would help him. But tears evaporated inside his eyes even before falling.

Fears must be faced.

"I… am…" he started saying, trying to find some consolation in his mantra. But he lacked the strength to even talk.

We all have to, sooner or later.

He wished Alex, that poor devil, could rest in peace.

If only I could, too, he thought. And he immediately gave up to sleep, beyond any expectations.

20 – Before the Storm

August began with a Cleansing, the third. Thousands of liters of acid were injected in the Tank, as always, to melt as many corpses as possible.

Giovanni stolidly supervised the process . He was well aware that everything fell under unquestionable and proven schemes, and the sphere of emotions had to give up, disappear. In Camp 9 people died every day. The soil, the air, the sunlight, everything was full of death. But that wasn't a good reason to give up to useless interior torments with the only result of suffering even when on the right side of the barricade. He had learnt his lesson long ago. And hundreds of melt bodies dispersed under his feet weren't something appropriate to think about. That was just how things were.

Back in his apartment he ate an abundant breakfast, ignoring the trembling that created many concentrical circles on the surface of his latte in the cup he was holding with both his hands.

* * *

The month went on between some of hot days and others graced by the northern breeze.

He didn't receive any other communications from the general and asked the EGs how things were going out there was as useful as asking his reflection in the mirror. He actually could get some answers from it from time to time. He knew that talking to oneself was a sign of instability, but he was of the mind that his condition justified that small deviancy. And who could hear him anyway? *The amoeba*? He grinned every time he thought about the mass of dying bodies that way.

One day, while staring at the Well, he fantasized about that green circle surrounded by black being his brain. Half-closing his eyes he could see it melt in a slimy, waved, spongy mass that could very well be the radiography of his cranium. The idea was intriguing. But he was clever enough to rapidly stray from the path that lead to such thoughts. There were weeds there, and sharp stones emerged from the ground. Better to proceed on the beaten path, the one paved with hard work, obedience and rigor leading him to…

Where? He wondered looking in the mirror. And with a peaceful smile he answered: "To your island, of course."

For time to time he still thought about his life before the Tank. In the beginning nostalgia had been overwhelmed by enthusiasm, so he

had little time think back to a not particularly brilliant or attractive past; not so much to make him regret his choice, at least. Now, after eight months inside that huge cylinder, he realized difficult it was for him to mentally rebuild the apartment he had left and where he had lived for many years. The topographical references of the outside world, which were once straight lines guiding him, had folded like the legs of a chair inside the trunk of a car, amassing inside his head.

There were lots of faces and names in the world of his past, the outside world. It was incredible how so many things inside him were fading away. His memories were hundreds of balloons attached to a thread, like those tied outside houses for a child's birthday. But the birthday had already passed and in time the balloons were left there in their uselessness, bending their heads, getting smaller, withering…

He had promised to always look forward. And it was what he had managed to do. Of what was behind his back – all those things that couldn't keep up with him or couldn't reach him – he could do without.

No, he was happy about being there. He was satisfied of his job. He didn't want to go home early.

"I am the NMO, yes sir!" He showed his tongue to the mirror and, thinking back to Stevanich's word, he added: "And whatever fear awaits him, I will face it."

He would have to keep that promise a few weeks later, when the fires lit.

21 – Fires of Death

September 21, 6:43 P.M.

Giovanni was sitting in the kitchen in front of a cup of tea that had gotten out the microwave twenty minutes earlier, but was now almost cold now. The TV, muted. Some hunters were frantically building a bamboo cage inside which they hoped to put some animal, a gorilla, maybe, or a leopard…

Giovanni would have looked asleep if it weren't for the wide open eyes. He was aware of himself and what surrounded him, and to some degree also of the content of the documentary about Africa managed to get in through a crack in his awareness; but for all intents and purposes his mind had imploded in a state of peaceful apathy. It happened often lately. The activities he used to fill the many empty spaces in his daily life – reading, listening to music, exercise with weights – had momentarily lost their appeal.

It's the upcoming autumn, he had told himself.

Even when he was still studying, he remembered it well, the end of the summer was always accompanied by a lack of spirit, or to be more honest, laziness. So, when it seemed nothing could invigorate him, he found comfort in sitting there in front of a mute television, in a state of interior void he found extremely relaxing.

But in that late afternoon, suddenly an alarm in the center of his brain violently pulled him away from his mediation. He raised his wrist, looking at the clock with horror.

6:43!

He immediately stood up, almost kicking the chair over. How was that possible? He had had two deliveries in the morning, a third one in the afternoon at 4:15, and he was waiting for a fourth one… at 6:30.

Nobody in sight. It was inconceivable. Or had he misunderstood?

In the meanwhile the hunters in the TV were pushing some big feline inside a cage that looked inadequate to contain an animal that size. But Giovanni's problem was way worse. He approached the window in the kitchen to see if he could get some information from there.

In the distance, the siren in the Center cried, a lament that expanded and shrieked hysterically alternating high and low pitched sounds. He had never heard it before and immediately got the goosebumps. The general alarm had gone off. In the same moment he realized it, a chain of rapid *beeps* came from the Control. The alert had been automatically forwarded to him, too.

Through the small window he could only see some distant flashes,

a vibrating redness imitating the sunset. He ran to the bedroom. And what he saw while breathing out vapor stains on the wall made his legs weak.

Fires had been lit. There three, four blazing from the tops the roofs and through many windows he could see yellow and red tongues. Under the siren's cry, despite being distant, rifle gunshots and even grenade explosions could be heard. In the eye of hat small hell tenths of black human shapes moved about.

He bit the side of his hand. There was a battle, down there. But who? The answer penetrated his head like a needle: *the revolutionaries*. He was witnessing an attack to Camp 9, an operation that had been organized long ago and with great attention to detail. But how was it possible that the NMO had been blindsided?

The continuous, obsessive sound from the Control was piercing his brain. It wasn't the right moment to thing about how they had come to *that*. They needed to do something about it, and quick.

Another explosion, this time stronger. Beyond the trees circumscribing the parking lot, now, vivid flames rose, pillars of black smoke on top of them. Some vehicle had been blown up. Giovanni had never received any instructions on what to do in case of an armed assault. One idea came forward in the confusion of his mind: he needed to isolate himself. He needed to prevent anyone unauthorized to get in the Tank. Because *it* was the target. Camp 9 wasn't, from a tactical-military point of view. The many hearts of the NMO, the ones pulsating with deadly armaments, where others, elsewhere. The attack had no other goal than to conquer the Tank, seen as a symbol of the Order's power on life and death.

We are many… and we are ready…

The words of that revolutionary crawled out of his memory and, like the blue, acid spitting anaconda, injected him the venom of fear. He had to move.

He rushed to the kitchen, grabbed a chair and dragged it out of the apartment. One of the lean metal legs got stuck in the door for a second. Giovanni freed it with a kick and a curse. His organism was now producing adrenaline at full regime. He went to the elevator and pressed the call button. Never like in that moment the slowness with which the cabin went up had been so exasperating and, from the noises echoing in the vertical tunnel, he feared that the cables were about to snap. It was just his imagination, he was sure. But he couldn't avoid grinding his teeth and growl like a trapped beast.

As soon as the clangor stopped and the doors opened, he pushed the chair forward and positioned it between the photocells, preventing the doors from closing. A simple solution, but an efficient one.

The other possible way in was the Escape. But that – if they

couldn't manage to get their hands on the right key – was safe.

(*Are you sure? Do you really think that a couple of bullets to the lock wouldn't solve the problem?*)

He realized he was thinking in a confused way, but he wasn't surprised. The incessant *beep* echoing in the Control and running through the Ring was dazing him. How long would it go on? Until he turned it off, of course. The message had been received, so he went back in and switched the alarm off. It was like suddenly putting is head in a tin bucket. The reverberating silence falling on his almost made him stumble.

(*You're not going to pass out now, are you?*)

But the effect produced by that sudden acoustic interruption lasted just a few seconds, because from the outside the noises of battle had become louder. *Nearer.*

He ran to his bedroom, catching a glimpse of the mute TV in the kitchen.

A man was flying over a mountain valley on a hang-glider. A glider on which to run away, get to safety…

But it would be a great act of cowardice. However scared he might be, he would never be a coward. "I am the NMO", he said, but he almost didn't recognize his own voice.

Looking out the window he immediately noticed how far the fire was spreading and how much smoke was expanding, intoxicating the red and purple clouds on the horizon. The gunshots went on. How many were already dead? Instead of the entry gate, he could now see a large, smoldering space opening Camp 9 to the outside world. There were lots of people going in and out, running, curved, burdened with weapons, rucksacks, bags. There were really lots of them.

Giovanni looked up to the sky, a dark expanse filled with shadows from which very few stars met his gaze. He could do nothing but wait. Hw could only watch the events unfold, hoping they would go for the better; and get ready to face any threat to him and the Tank.

He touched the holiest with one hand. The Beretta FS 83.9 was still there, ready for the fourth and last daily delivery, which had been canceled for circumstances beyond his control. There were fourteen rounds inside the magazine. He would be better off getting the second one, too. He went back to the Control, opened the drawer where he usually locked the pistol in and found what he was looking for. He opened the small packet and put its content inside the pocket of his shirt, right above the heart.

Then he went back to he window.

He was left out of breath. He sucked in with a pound noise, as if he had a snorkel between his teeth.

A mass of armed people – on foot or jeeps – was walking towards

the Tank. There were about a hundred. A confused clamor accompanied them. They would be there in a minute or so.

The foolish idea of throwing a cauldron of boiling oil on them came spontaneously, like a horrid multicolored flower, from the fertile soil of his fantasy. He whispered a prayer, grinding them with his nervously chattering teeth.

("*Aren't you afraid?"*)

Yes, general. I really am…

They couldn't see them from that distant, but his instinct made him move away from the window. A good shooter with a good rifle could work miracles, had he spotted him.

What could they do? That was his doubt. He didn't know what resources they had nor their intentions. The only thing he was sure about is that if they reached him, they would unleash all the hatred they were brooding who-knows-how long, not caring about him being nothing but an executor. On the other hand he couldn't appeal to sacred duty of obedience like the soldiers in Nuremberg during the previous century. He was a civilian who had chosen to apply for that job and fought to get it; if he got caught by the revolutionaries, he would have no right to ask them for mercy.

He went back to the Ring, gun in hand and blood running from the lip he was biting.

He tried to think about it. First, they would try with the main entrance. And when they realized the cabin was unavailable, what would they do? Was it worth it to try forcing the elevator door, maybe using a bomb? No. They would simply reach a dark shaft with the only perspective of needing to climb the steel cables like monkeys.

They no doubt knew (and there were many things they probably knew, considering what they had managed to do) that on the side of the Tank there was a ladder, hanging from the concrete, leading almost to the top…

They could climb only one at a time, and any bulky weapon would be an hindrance; after reaching the top and opening it, they wouldn't be able to burst in all together. It made him think of the Thermopylae and with an ironic hiccup he swallowed some blood.

He moved away from the elevator – still open, with the chair has its steadfast sentinel – and, ignoring his own reflection on the glass of Shutter, he reached the Escape. Alex had gotten in from there using a copy of the key. The people outside (*the revolutionaries)* had likely gotten their hands on one, too; he momentarily holstered his Beretta, took his keys out of his pocket and looked for the right one, then took it out of the keychain. He then put it into the lock and turned it a little to prevent other keys from pushing it out.

There. He could do nothing but wait for them

He stepped back until he had his back against the wall, the back of his head to the Porthole. Had he turned, he would see his face trapped in the darkness of those curved crystals. He didn't, also because his excitement could trick him into seeing other faces, and it certainly wasn't the tine to give up to the torments of his imagination.

Crawling with his back against the wall he bent his knees, sitting on the floor. He extracted his gun again and, with a two-handed grip, used his kneecaps as a base. Fourteen rounds, plus another fifteen-round magazine in his pocket. Twenty-nine in total. They could be enough, if after seeing the first comrades fall, the others would desist. Or maybe not. IT would be enough to throw a grenade…

No way he could get out alive.

He almost felt a kid again, when he played war with his friends in a thicket on the outskirts of his town. He used to hide behind a tree, armed with a sling, rubber bands or peashooter, and reviewed the best strategies of attack and defense to win that battle. The only thing one could lose then was his reputation, which in his thirteen-year-old eyes was invaluable. Now his very life was at stake; the concept of reputation was a small thing in comparison. Of course there was honor. And the idea had some kind of comforting appeal. It wasn't enough to drive the fear away, of course, but it somehow ennobled his critical situation.

The general would be proud of me, if he could see me now, he thought, using his forearm to wipe the sweat that was dropping from his temple to his neck. *If he is till alive.*

He imagined his lying behind his desk, a still smoking hole in the middle of his head. No, it couldn't be…

Stevanich wasn't there. Stevanich was managing everything from a more secure position, a less accessible one. Wherever he was, he had already been informed of what was happening. It was only a matter of waiting for the counteroffensive. *Nemo me impune lacessit.* Camp 9 was under attack and Giovanni couldn't believe a hundred man could be, however well organized they might be, could conquer the Tank and overthrow what it symbolized.

(*They will be enough to capture you and make you regret being born.)*

He shook his head, as if by doing so he could drive away the harmful thoughts that didn't miss a chance to weaken him in critical moments like these. He had already had the chance to think about it, the fact than in such situations those thoughts were his worst enemies. And then…

And then nothing. From the outside, there came the first noises.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Boots on metal tubes. Feet on steps. Men incoming, almost reaching the platform acting as a landing, right outside the Escape.

Enough crying, enough hiding in futile mental ways out. It was the time to annul himself, cage his rational side, with all its neurosis, and leave room to the animal roaring in his blood.

Voices, steps, keys. The keys, of course…

The black handle lowered itself once, twice, but to no avail.

Did you think I would the door open? Maybe with a doormat?

Something metallic was inserted in the lock. *Click clack.* More attempts on the handles, useless ones.

No, friends, no way.

Giovanni grinned, glad he had managed to make their lives more difficult preemptively forestalling their attempt to get into the Tank without breaking a sweat.

They were shouting, out there, but he couldn't understand what they were saying. The blood flowing in his ears produced e deep buzz, spaced out by the dull thuds of his heartbeat. They shouted and kept hitting the door. It could be a gun or the stock of a rifle. They were trying to break the lock. Someone cursed, others laughed excitedly. And all those noises expanded like black waves around the Rings only to come back at him, giving the impression the blows came from the other side, too, as if the door of the Shutter was about to be forced from the inside.

Obeying the commands of the survival instinct that he felt taking control for the first time, Giovanni gradually tilted rightwards; when he was almost lying on the linoleum floor he moved his legs and got out of what would probably be the line of fire. Then, silence fell outside. Giovanni held his breath. The handle bent. The second came with the strength of a maul and the lock moved inwards ten centimeters or so. Cheers outside. The third shot sent broke locking mechanism and got stuck into the Porthole. Giovanni instantly thought he would have a hole in his throat, hadn't he moved.

He aimed forward, pervaded by a chill he had never felt before. As if his blood had suddenly stopped running.

Once more moment of silence. Somebody, on the other side, was getting ready. The wasn't enough room barging in shoulder first, but he strong enough kick would do.

Giovanni whispered: "I'm ready."

With a loud noise the Escape opened in a bang of metal fragments and splinters of green paint, rotating on its hinges and crashing into the wall. On the external platform a bulky man still had his leg up. Giovanni tried to look him in the eyes, but the neon lights couldn't penetrate the shadow cone hiding his face. The intruder had no way of immediately noticing the Keeper lying prone, but he would in a few seconds. If he stepped in the Ring, the other would follow him and it would have been the end.

But it would be cowardly not to give him at least one chance.

"I'm here." Giovanni said calmly.

The man lowered his gaze, following the voice. An indistinct gurgle came out of his throat. He started rising his right hand – the one holding the gun used to destroy the lock – but it was too late. Giovanni couldn't even hear the gunshot. He saw the Beretta vibrate in his hands and smelled the stench of the heated metal.

The man fell backwards, pushed by the force of the projectile that hit him under his sternum. The sky behind him was dark and Giovanni couldn't clearly see the arms and legs moving. He thought he saw a foot where the head was before and at the same time a scream reached his ears, moving away from him. Now, beyond the door, only the railing was visible, nothing else.

He heard screams and curses.

Giovanni was shaking, but he didn't move.

HE heard somebody, the one who was probably getting ready to enter after the first, growling. "Be careful, the pig is armed, in there!"

That's what I am for them, he thought. *An* armed pig…

So the answer came naturally to him, out loud: "*Nemo me impune lacessit!* Do you understand? *Nemo me…"*

A movement, a sneaky shape crawling on the other side of the door. Giovanni rapidly pulled the trigger twice. Two flashed, two violent snaps.

"*…impune lacessit!*"

Silence. No lament, no noises. The bullets were lost in the night without meeting flesh nor bone, but the man about to get in had rapidly changed his mind.

Maybe they were talking, in that precise moment. Plotting something. They could choose to barge in, use numbers. But they knew that the first ones who got in, however fast they could be, would inevitably be in his line of fire. A spark of folly in its purest state reminded him of the mice in that old tale. They needed to tie a bell to the cat's neck, so that they could hear him and get to safety. Yes, but…who would go?

I'm talking to you, revolutionaries: who wants to get i first?

No, they wouldn't. He could almost hear them. "*Who has a bomb? Pass me a bomb!"*

Someone had it and it was advancing up the stair. It got up, from hand to hand…

In a few seconds he would see a small, rounded object fly inside the Ring, roll somewhere, and if he was lucky he would have time to run away; but after the explosions, they would get in, go everywhere. Maybe he would manage to get inside the elevator, covering his escape by shooting left and right, but then? Once downstairs, he had

no chance of saving himself.

There was another possibility: grab the bomb before it could explode and throw it back at them. It would be a great feat…

Or, exploiting that moment of stasis, he could run to one side of the Escape and start shooting down the ladder, towards all those who were grabbing on to it. They would fall one after the other. It was worthy of a war veteran, and…

His fantasies were stopped suddenly by a noise – a *series* of noises – approaching. Absorbed by his frantic plans of survival he didn't perceive it until it was too evident to ignore it. Shots on shots on shots.

Patpatpatpatpatpatpatpat.

A drop of sweat got into his eye and Giovanni had to rapidly close it to ease the pain. It seemed the sound of quick steps, of people running. He imagined that elevator being called and coming up packed with angry revolutionaries. Or worse, the Shutter wide open, and from its glass maws man both alive and dead swarming out, like in his worst dreams…

The Ring was filled with that obsessive noise. He bit his lip again, and tasted the coppery blood.

Beyond the darkness of the door, where his death was being planned, now the screams of terrified men, screams that the sound (*Patpatpatpatpatpatpatpat*) was submerging with a thundering wave. A light appeared in the sky, a turbulent beam, white as snow, and the rumbling of engines filled everything. Giovanni laughed and tears started running down his cheeks.

A helicopter!

Powerful blades whipped the fresh, dark air, the blinding eye looking for preys. And as soon as it found them, an infernal fest of bullets and flames set the world on fire. Giovanni lowered his gun, astonished by the rectangle of lights, explosions, screams, rumbles and gunshots, endless gunshots. From his point of view he couldn't see the enormous engine of death, but he could imagine his movements from the moving lights and sounds, the veers, the dives, while the machine guns spit flames and metal on falling bodies, amassing in hopeless escapes, decaying in red shreds feeding a constantly hungry soil. The whole structure of concrete and metal vibrated, shake by the artificial thunder. Hypnotized, Giovanni stood up and slowly walked towards the changing colors luring him. He wanted to see, fill his eyes and soul of that scene.

And he looked.

Nobody was on the ladder, of course. He could calm down. With a hand on the railing, he followed the agile maneuver with witch the vehicle – an AB-413 armed with machine-guns firing one-hundred and

fifty round per minute – flew downwards and landed among the lifeless bodies. Everywhere, as far as the floodlight could go, there were corpses, or crawling shapes, some on all-four, other still standing.

A hatch opened outwards from one side of the chopper and six, seven soldiers came out, all with their rifles out. And they didn't wait one second before unloading their ammunitions on anything that moved.

From above, Giovanni feasted on that show. His heart had calmed down and his mind started crawling out from the torpor it was in. He stared at the scene with a certain detachment, like watching a movie; but the tremor running through his body destroyed the simulacrum of indifference in which he was in.

When the soldiers stopped firing they they returned inside the helicopter – which was still buzzing, a sleeping beast ready to attack – ducking under the blades.

At the same time two other soldiers got out, with two heavy bags on their bags. Giovanni wondered what they were about to do, but as soon as he saw them aim their weapons forward he understood. And thanked that the LPG tank was on the other side of the Tank.

Two tongues of fire came out in perfect sync and, without separating the dead from the living, devoured clothes and flesh. In about thirty seconds a large bonfire at the feet of the Tank was all that remained of that revolutionary contingent. A black, stinking smoke rose from the flames, expanding in spirals; when Giovanni inhaled the stick of burning bodies he holstered his gun and put his hand on his mouth. He stepped backwards, groaning, distancing himself from the heat, but despite going back to the dark cool of the Ring he kept standing by the doorstep.

A devastating migraine plunged its fangs in his head, but in such a moment pain had no meaning. Outside, down there, among scarlet flashed evoking sombre visions from beyond, the helicopter's rotors strengthened their roar. In a few seconds, with a take-off blowing away smoke and heat in the night, the AB-413 brought itself near the torn Escape and its eye impertinently started searching inside the building. Giovanni rose and arm, shielding his face from the blinding beam. Did they want to shoot him too? He couldn't think of a reason why, but if that was how things would go, he had no intention of moving.

A cawing voice, amplified and distorted by a megaphone, fought the noise of the engine to be heard: "*The alarm has ceased. Restore the elevator's operability. We need to proceed with indoor controls. Do you understand, Keeper?*"

"Yes", whispered Giovanni. "I understand."

"*If you did, raise your right arm.*"

Giovanni did so, then let it fall.

"*Good. Proceed!*"

With a noise similar to the explosion of a mortar the megaphone was turned off and the helicopter tilted sidewards before leaving for the Center, on the other side of the Tank.

Giovanni turned around towards the corpse-stinking shadows and, walking like a robot, reached the elevator. He felt empty. Every bit of energy, every ember of that beastly fury energizing him until few minutes before had cooled down, dying in a diffused malaise. He would take some pills. Then he would cry. He needed to. Later. He had orders.

He pulled the chair away, letting the invisible ray of the photocell reach his destination, and watched the doors close. A few seconds later the elevator was called downstairs. He stepped backwards and leant against the wall, waiting.

22 – After the Storm

Lots of people went upstairs several times.

Giovanni saw them, talked to the, listened to what they wanted to say or ask him… always walking with the utmost attention on the edge of the cliff. He was physically exhausted, and more than once he felt like could see himself talking and moving from one place to the other, as if he was but a spectator of that sad play.

He was questioned for about half and hour by lieutenant Raggi (the same soldier superintending the Cleansings, and whose name he had learnt only then), to write as many details as possible in the report. He talked without omitting anything, save for what had happened only in his mind.

Trying to make the most of that exceptional circumstance, so favorable to talking, he tried asking: “Have there been many dead? In our ranks, I mean…”

The officer looked at him from above the frame of the spectacles he had worn for writing. “No, Corte. Not many.”

“Somebody I knew?”

Raggi, sitting at kitchen table with a big memo book, kept on writing, and didn’t look up. But he answered. “Probably. Escort Guards.”

Giovanni looked down at his knuckles. He knew there was no way he could get to know the names and surnames, at least not in that moment. But he surely would sooner or later. There was another question he wanted to ask. “And… general Stevanich?”

Raggi mumbled something unintelligible with a sigh that could be a sign of impatience. Then – maybe because of what Giovanni had done to defend the Tank, decisively slowing down the revolutionaries’ assault – he decided to grant him at least a half-answer. “He wasn’t here. He is out for institutional business. But he knows everything. And I think he will have more than one reason to be unhappy.” Giovanni kept staring at him, hoping to receive more information. But the lieutenant cut him with a “you will know everything in due time, Corte.”

* * *

Three men he had never seen before, wearing blue jumpsuits with red tetragrams on their chests, checked the state of the security door. Giovanni watched them, despite the smell of burnt flesh permeating the Ring, and felt compelled to describe then the dynamic of what

happened; they didn't look really interested, though. They unscrewed the deformed lock and took it of the door using hammers and pliers. They took some measures, talked among themselves, then left.

* * *

Doctor Nicastro came too, giving him a physical and asking him with fake ease some questions aimed to asses whether that experience had damaged his mental balance. Giovanni answered with extreme calm, trying to sound reassuring. And in all frankness, now that he had time to put the events in order following the logic of a report and put it into words – he was sure to be emotionally stable. Of course he couldn't evaluate himself: if his psyche was somehow distorted, so were his judgement.

A madman can't know he is, right?

The visit ended with handshake. The doctor smiled, but Giovanni couldn't understand if he was truly satisfied or if he just wanted to appease and calm him. He decided it didn't matter. He was very grateful for the box of sleep pills he left on the table with calculated nonchalance.

* * *

Once alone Giovanni took a warm shower (there had to be a leak somewhere as pressure was much lower than usual). There was no chance he would eat. He felt like there was rock where his stomach should have been. He opened the fridge and grabbed a half-empty can of orange juice. Then he opened the little box Nicastro had given him and wasn't surprised to find a single laminated blister from which most of the pills and been removed. Almost all of them. Out of eight, only one was left. Logical. Such drugs had to be given with extreme parsimony.

"There's no such thing as too much caution, eh doctor?"

He pressed with his thumb to pierce the thin layer of aluminum foil and observe the yellow sphere that had fallen on the palm of his hand; he then literally threw it in his throat, than drank as many sips of orange juice as needed to empty the can.

* * *

He slowly sunk into darkness, escorted by terrible thoughts made

lights as feathers by the chemicals in his brain. The smell of death came in from the violated Escape and crept like a phantom along the Ring. Even in the apartment, even in his bedroom…

He thought about the sentinels who had been assigned to extra guard turns at the bottom of the ladder until the door would be replaced. They probably wore masks in order to not get intoxicated.

He turned on one side, dreaming of lying on a mass of bodies, half soft and half sharp from the bony asperities. He thought about the man he had shot (*I killed him!*), a man who believed in his ideals so much he exposed himself so much. He didn't see his face, but he looked young…

It was the first time he had ever killed anyone (*Are you sure? But how many have you killed pressing a simple button?*) No, no… the convicts he had unloaded had already been killed by a sentence of the NMO. He was just the executor, he didn't have homicidal tendencies… he… he didn't…

The pillow smelled horribly of the burning bodies' stink and the thoughts dripping from his head. He fell asleep and an acid spurt of what he had drunk came out of his mouth.

23 – The Day After

There were no deliveries the following day, of course.

Giovanni could only imagine that the unforeseen assault to the Center also entailed the escape of all the convicts waiting to be Eliminated, included those whose Unloading was scheduled for that afternoon. He had no doubt they would be back.

The Well was on as usual, while the Postman wasn't. The fax was inactive, too. Probably the office department had been destroyed and they would probably need a few days to restore all the Camp's function. After all, he was asked to wait, too. He would receive directions at the right time, depending on how events unfolded. So had Lieutenant Raggi told him the evening before while bidding him farewell: "Keep doing your job, Corte. We'll let you know."

Yeah. *We'll let you know…* as if it was an audition for the cast of some movie or play.

* * *

The excavator and the bulldozer arrived at 8:00 A.M..

Giovanni watched them work for a while, sitting on the Escape's landing with a napkin on his mouth and nose. He couldn't understand hear what the soldiers and workers were shouting, but the purpose of the whole operation was clear. A heavy claw dug a deep and wide pit twenty meters away from the tank and after that the other machine began its work. At that point Giovanni got up and went back to his apartment. He knew that in an hour's time there would be no trace of the ash and coal colored corpses, just long, dark trails ending in a heap of dirt.

He went to his bedroom's window. Over there, in the distance, where the Operative Center was, there was movement. Men, vehicles of all kinds, tow trucks, tuckers…

The fire had been put off during the night and some buildings now showed the black, zig-zagged crusts of their roofs and the big smears of the same color coming out from the windows and crawling up the walls. A small crane was already working on the gate and fence. One day. One day would be enough, he was sure. Then Camp 9 would go back to work.

He wondered how many things he wanted to know and many he didn't care about. The emotional state in which he was could be represented by an almost horizontal diagram. He was supposed to feel proud of what he did the evening before. He was supposed to feel like

a *hero*, somehow. But…

He was just tired, no doubt. He needed time to refresh his body and mind. That chaos would go on inside him for days, the reverb debilitating him psychologically less and less destructively, before disappearing in the healthy detachment of a memory. Until then, he would behave at his best. Forging ahead and adapting to what would come.

The 11:30 A.M. news talked about the attack for a couple of minutes. The information provided were very generic, everything had of course been filtered by the NMO's chiefs who worked in media relations. No camera had been let near the Camp and in the video only the low-quality image of faraway fire could be seen.

"S*udden attack by a group of revolutionaries"*, said the speaker, "*to the penal structure named Camp 9. One or more infiltrators have supposedly used their position inside the structure to give information to the rioters and grant them the so-called* surprise advantage. *Few casualties in the ranks of the New Moral Order, while the attackers have been neutralized and delivered to justice."*

Giovanni listened with his elbows on the table, his head on his extended fingers. The text the journalist was reading needed a few adjustments for truth's sake, but not always is truth needed nor useful. *Neutralized and delivered to justice* is just another way to say *massacred and charred.* Details. What happened couldn't be changed. But the part about infiltrators had kindled his interest.

What the speaker said before the end of the news was a true hammer blow. "*Unofficial sources state that the rioters were led by the thirty-two year-old son of one of the generals founders on the New Moral Order. It seems the attack on Camp 9 was possible, despite the massive security measures, because of the information given by the traitor, whose name still hasn't been disclosed."*

The son of a general…Giovanni wondered who he could ask to know who he was. To know all the details needed for organizing an all-in-all successful plan, at least in its first phase, there was only one possible General for all things regarding Camp 9.

He turned off the TV and sat in front of the Well. Barbed wire was rolling in his stomach. The big, blind, silent amoeba was twisting, turning and twitching because of the thousands of limbs surfacing and disappearing in a sort of crazy choreography.

"How are things in there? If it's any consolation, it's a mess out here, too."

He went to his booskshelf and for the umpteenth time he looked at the well-aligned books. It was a purely mechanical gesture, as he had no intention of choosing something to read. He had to change his mind about needing new books. How long had that copy on *The Idiot*

been on his bedside table, with a bookmark at the beginning of the second chapter? Thing is he didn't really feel like reading. Or exercising.

It's all accumulated tiredness, he told himself. That's what it was.

He crashed on the bed, but immediately got up, disgusted. He wanted to change the pillow, wet with the night's regurgitations, but he had forgotten. Wit no rush, he fixed that shameful inconvenience.

* * *

In the early afternoon two of the workers that had taken away the Escape's lock the night before came and fixed everything in about half an hour. They also gave him a new copy of the key.

"Yours melted." They explained.

He tried to ask some questions about the casualties and that *son of a general* he had heard about on TV. But their reaction was the one he expected, literally: a double "No, haven'y heard anything."

At about 3:30 P.M. a technician came, a guy in his thirties, in a white lab coat, who worked for some minutes behind the Control's console until the Postman's screen lit up again.

"All done." he announced, rubbing his hands together. "It should work now."

Giovanni tried asking him: "Did you watch the news?"

The man quickly grabbed his tool case with a force smile. "Nope, I've been working all morning to fix everything that was broken. The damage at the Center is pretty serious. They will probably have to move everything to the new tank, as soon as possible. The fire has burnt a lot of stuff."

"The new Tank?"

"Oh, well, I've heard some voice. I don't even know where it is. They say it will be ready next year…" He faked looking at his watch. "If I don't go back fast I won't hear the end of it… farewell."

"Thanks. You too."

And the man exited the apartment at a fast pace. He maybe realized one second too late he had said too much. Right. It was always like that. And the Keeper couldn't ask any questions. He had no right to know. He lived in a circle he couldn't step out of.

He remembered the first selection for the following year's Keeper should have started by then. A little more than a trimester was left before the changing of the guard. And who knows how many young men were dreaming that exciting and profitable adventure like he had.

The thought of the money prize surfaced again, but it was with a

certain unease that he found out, even if for a moment, he couldn't remember the amount. And it had been some time since he had last thought of his island. That sunny island, with endless beaches, the one he saw himself lying on, with no thoughts on his mind…

I found something vaguely sinister in imagining that absolute tranquillity, bathed in a light blinding your eyes even when they are closed, a warmth stinging your skin, making it darker every day. HE could smell a faint brackish reek coming the ocean, which wasn't blue as he remembered it. And there was another smell. Of dying, decaying fish.

He opened his eyes and, looking at his distressed face, he groaned, scared. How did he end up in front of the mirror? He had wandered around the house lost in his thought. It had happened before. Nothing special.

He went to his bedroom and lay on his bed, drawing dark shapes on the ceiling with his eyes.

* * *

When he heard the well known acoustic signal – the Postman's *beep* – the first thing he did was to look at the alarm clock. 5:22 P.M.. Almost one hour had passed since he went to bed. He didn't think he would fall asleep, but apparently he did. Did he dream about something? No, he didn't remember anything. Inside his head, while he rose from the bed, his brain started oscillating from one side to the other, first right, then left. Like a bell. He grimaced, moving to fingers to his temples.

Here we go again.

First stop, the bathroom. He put a couple of painkillers on his tongue and forced them to go down his throat drowning them with a bitter, coppery tasting glass of water. He grimaced, went in front of the mirror, lowering his eyelid with a fingertip, and looked at his sclera. He thought it was a horrible vision.

(*Stop with all this nonsense worthy of a drunk psychopath, Giovanni. You aren't like that. Go read what they wrote you and get a hang of yourself.)*

"Yes, master."

While moving away from the mirror he had the terrible impression that his reflection had moved after he had. Just a fraction of second; but it was enough to pierce his heart. And to make him lucid again, like a bucket of cold water to the face. He went to the Control rubbing his cheeks and chin, considering whether if it was appropriate to shave, when his hands would stop shaking.

"*Est. Keeper Corte."* The message said, "*in renewing the expression of our esteem for your behavior during the critical moment, which came to a positive end also thanks to your resistance against the rebel horde, we inform you that the delivery operations will begin tomorrow."*

Giovanni didn't even feel like smiling, even if that pompous language didn't really adapt to his state of mind. But he know that form always had priority in that context. Especially in trivial matters.

He thought about the opportunity to answer appropriately, maybe with some highlights like "*I'm proud of fulfilling my duty"* or similar sentences. But he decided he could skip the hypocrisy phase and be straightforward.

"*Is it possible,"* he wrote, "*to know how many from the Center's staff were killed and who they are? I also heard that the son of a general was head of the revolt. Is it Stevanich's?"*

He checked it on the fly and sent it without thinking twice. What did he have to lose? He had already asked several people, who had no doubt already reported him for being so curious. It was like stirring once more an already stirred soup.

It was for the conviction of throwing a stone into the void that the buzzing of the fax machine, after a minute or so, took him by surprise.

He grabbed the still warm sheet of paper with a quick gesture, almost as if he in case he would wait, then the machine would eat it back. It was a list of names and surnames, fifteen total; no premise, no side note, no signature. It was an aseptic list, with no apparent context. But it was very important to Giovanni. It was the first precise and unequivocal answer he had ever received from the Center's brain trust. He then realized that it was a pretty useless answer. Maybe he knew some of those people, but only by the nicknames he had given them. He look for a *Lorenzo*, which was Scalp, but he didn't find him. Who he found was Giulio Lojodice. Good old Scar. May he rest in peace. And who knows the others…

He lazily folded the sheet two, four, eight times, leaving it on the console.

But about the general…

Beep.

(*Don't tell me you also have an answer for the other question, guys. I could cry…*)

On the Postman's screen only one line of text appeared: "*Watch the news at 8:00."*

Good. He would.

"*Thanks*", he answered. "*I won't miss them.*"

* * *

Sitting in front of a tuna can and some slices of ham he turned the TV on precisely at 8:00, just in time for the jingle. He chewed, watched and listened without really following until 8:14, when the speaker closed his service about the inauguration of a high school and started the one the journalist had very cinematographically called *Assault on Camp 9*. Giovanni straightened his back and opened his ears; and when after a short introduction he saw general Stevanich appear on the screen, he let the cutlery fall on the dish with a loud noise and crossed his arms.

An out of sight interviewer started asking some simple questions – undoubtedly agreed in advanced – regarding the dynamic of the Assault, to which Stevanich answered with calm and sureness born from preparation. Giovanni could live, through that report, the almost epic unfurling of the battle in the Center, the one could assist to only from afar. But when they said that the casualties *in the ranks of the New Order* had been five – while the fax he had received counted triple that number – he thought he should doubt everything they said. Then, when the general stated that all the rebels short of the ones that were killed had been arrested and imprisoned in Camp 9 waiting for a process, he understood it was a version he too should tell, in the future, when talking about what happened.

The interview veered towards a question Giovanni didn't expect: "*General, is true that your son was leading the rebels?"*

Stevanich remained calmed. Why shouldn't he after all? It sure as hell wasn't a surprise question. He nodded and answered: "*Marco was always against the ideas of the NMO and we never got along. I think family must take a step back in front of the political, social and moral ideals that inspire our Order. Marco is a traitor. He used confidential information to elude our security system, but he didn't consider the immense defensive power we have. He was arrested and will share the fate of all those in his condition."*

Giovanni unbuttoned the collar of his shirt.

They are all underground now. Shot and charred. The kitchen was suddenly hot.

Salutations and thanks followed, then the journalist appeared on the TV again to introduce the weather forecast. Giovanni turned it off.

He tried to get up, but a sudden vertigo forced him into sitting again. Tiredness. Tiredness asking for immediate rest. What was that churning in his head? He sure wasn't annoyed by the "revised" version the general had told to the spectators. It was natural, a part of the power plays. Had those rebels been imprisoned, then their fate would have been much worse. They would have only contributed to fill the Tank. How many deliveries would there have been? He whistled at the idea. No, the thought that kept annoying him was another. If that

Marco Stevanich lead the operation, wasn't it plausible that he was the first man who had to climb the ladder and shoot the lock? He would never know for sure; but the thought that the men he had shot was the general's son upset him

Be honest: would you have shot him, if you knew who he was?

"Yes", he answered out loud. "I would have, no doubt. He was there to kill me."

Had he some alcohol to drink, then there couldn't have been a better moment to get drunk. But in the Tank alcohol was forbidden, like smoke and may more things. For his own good, of course.

We inform you that the delivery operations will begin tomorrow.

Right. The show must go on.

To bed, Giovanni. March.

He found the strength to go to the bathroom, brush his teeth, go to his bedroom, and crash on the bed. His mind went off like one of those ancient oil lamps when a small wheel was turned to shorten the wick.

24 – Questions, More Questions

The last Cleansing of the year, the one scheduled for the end of October, was moved up a couple of weeks. Recently there had been more deliveries than usual and the Tank needed the extra work.

From the day of the great *Assault on Camp 9* the NMO had intensified the investigations regarding the so-called *risky* environments, those suspected of being hostbeds for insurrections or dissidence. On the morning faxes Giovanni found "*Revolutionary*" way more often. He expected things to be that way.

And so, halfway through October a new wave of acid cancelled once more the layers of compressed, deformed, torn, stiffened, annihilated in postures no one could ever see, but only imagine. From the tucker to the anaconda, to the Tank, to the Crown, to the tissues, flesh, organs, bones…

He wondered what he would think, what he would feel, if he was there, among the others, alive but unable to escape his doom, buried in the dark under the tonnes of corpses, listening to the sizzle of that liquid caressing his skin and piercing him little by little, get inside him, reach the deepest, most inaccessible layers of his body, of his soul…

His own scream of terror woke him from his daydreaming. And when he realized he was simply inside the lift, back from the Cleansing, he sighed as if his lungs had been squeezed.

He entered the Ring almost stumbling and entered his flat with a hand on his mouth and the that on his stomach.

* * *

He had thought that the last months would flow away with haste; that the days would pass one after the other painlessly. He was wrong.

Time had taken a new form. The obsessive repetition of gestures and words seemed to generate a slow vortex enlarging at each turn in an hideous kaleidoscope of pictures and feelings. Whatever he did, he spontaneously wondered if he was doing it in *that* moment, or if he was remembering, dreaming, imagining, all very vividly, something he had done hundreds of times.

He tried picking up the book he had left off, but Dostoevskij kept pushing him out of his novel; eventually *The Idiot* went back to his bookshelf. Making an effort to maintain a good physical shape didn't seem so important to him, in that moment his mind needed his attention way more.

It was true that *mens sana in corpore sano*, but he didn't feel sick or thought he needed therapy. He knew that everything would ho back to its place once that experience was over, once he could go back to the world he had abandoned.

(*Does that world still exists, Giovanni?*)

There was an island. Somewhere. And the money, too, yes.

All the things he had always wanted.

* * *

The deliveries went on, but November saw them lessen sensibly. Some Escort Guard stopped showing up and Giovanni wanted to believe they were transferred, or that the temporary decrease in workload made their presence superfluous. Bags, Glutton, Wrinkles, Steve… he never really befriended any of them in particular, but he would rather imagine them ready to work in the Tank, the tenth, the one that would maybe be operative who-knows-where in the beginning of the new year…

But a part of him *knew* they were dead, that their names and surnames were in that damn list. He never asked the other EGs. They wouldn't answer. But their silence would be enough.

Then came a day, about halfway through the month, when Scalp came alone, escorting a young foreigner who had killed his girlfriend. Once he had unloaded that scum, Giovanni took advantage of the situation task what was happening out there. "Excuse, can I ask you…"

Scalp looked at him as if he had just tossed a cake on his face, but he pretended not to notice. "…how come the deliveries have decreased so much lately? Has it something to do with the new Tank?"

Scalp stared at him for a few seconds, just enough time for him to evaluate whether he would lose something by answering him. He came to the conclusion that the question was acceptable. "It is possible, yes."

It was a start. Giovanni felt authorized to ask another question. "But… isn't the alternation between male and female Tanks valid anymore? After this, they should…"

"The next won't be *after*, but *in place* of this one."

Giovanni opened his mouth, but did so more to let the information get in his head better that to talk.

Scalp interrupted any possible comment. "But you are done here at the end of the year. Why do you care?"

"No, of course… nothing. I was just asking."

Scalp snorted through his nostrils, shaking his head and smiling tiredly. “How many questions have you asked since coming here?”

Giovanni shrugged, catching that shard of levity. “I’ve lost count.”

“And how many answers did you get?”

“Let’s see…” He pretended to think about it, frowning, then: “Two? Three?”

“What’s that, another question?”

It was impossible to choke the laughter overwhelming them both. A short, warm, honest laugh. The silence that followed ate its echo along the Ring.

“That’s how thing go around here, Keeper. You have to make do with what you are given and ask for nothing more. Do you think you can do it?”

Giovanni felt a clump of infinite bitterness in his throat. He had already forgotten he was laughing just a few seconds earlier.

“Yes. I think so.”

Scalp nodded, simulating a serious and meditating expression, then went back to the elevator. “See you, Keeper. If we don’t, I wish you good luck.” He saluted. But he wasn't smiling, not even with his eyes.

Giovanni imitated him immediately. “you too!”

It was the last time they saw each other.

25 – Death, Probably

Catching and sewing together small parts of the news Giovanni managed to get a pretty clear picture. Tank 9 and the whole Camp would be abandoned at the beginning of the new year, when the *wonderful Tank 10* (bigger, more secure, *more everything*) would be the star of the New Moral Order. A huge building with every technological comfort, in a Camp that would be officially inaugurated by general Aurelio Stevanich himself. Well, hearing that the stern general, despite the recent loss, continued to be the man he had always been reassured him. A speaker had underlined, while talking about Stevanich, that his strength of character was the one supporting the NMO and, as long as there would be a man of such nerves in the system the Country would never have reasons to fear the weak, destructive wave of restoration.

Giovanni tasted those affirmations between tongue and palate. Once, those words would be like a kindle to fire up his spirit; now he felt them slip away leaving only a faint smell of dust. His mood was the season's fault. Together with the perception of the end of a cycle.

(*And don't forget the tiredness. You are tired, Giovanni.*)

Yes, yes, he really was tired. But of what? All that death, probably. He had lived with dying people, corpses and ghosts for more than eleven months. He could easily calculate the exact number of people he had thrown beyond the barrier, but what would the use be? To compare it with the sum he would get once out of that dying, grey tower?

It had already been some nights, now that the first ten days of December were fading behind his back, that he really struggled to fall asleep. He had tried asking, using the Postman, if it was possible to receive some drugs, without referring to Nicastro and the sleep pills he had given his that time, maybe not in a completely official way. But no answer was given to him. What Scalp had told him had then come back to his mind: "*You have to make do with what you are given and ask for nothing more. Do you think you can do it?*"

He would, he had no choice.

Thinking back to Scalp and the fact that he hadn't seen him since the day they even got to laugh together, he had come to two conclusions: either he had been transferred to the new, wonderful (and hideous) Tank, or he had received some kind of punishment for staying there with him longer than it was allowed for a single delivery without a convincing reason. Everything was possible. Despite Giovanni had been inside there for almost a year, he couldn't say he had understood the mechanism regulating the gigantic structure of the

NMO. He didn't even know who was sitting behind the desks, there, at the Center. Who wrote him, who answered him, who sent him faxes, who managed the laundry and food services, every little thing he had to deal with for months. He knew it could very well be the same person every time and that for him the interlocutor was always the *NMO*, as if it was an autonomous, sentient superior entity. Of which he (*I am the NMO*) would be a part for a few more days.

Beyond the windowpane, from the bedroom, he contemplated the long, pale strokes with which the wind painted the sky, silently unraveling old, cloudy blankets. In the distance, flocks of birds united and disbanded in the air, while tired sunlight fell over the world.

He could stare at that landscape for hours, hearing it drip into his soul. It comforted him. It gave him tranquillity. All that December greyness inspired indolence and resignation. It help him watch with the right emotional detachment the vans that day after day left the parking lot of the Center to disappear in the mist. After the fog and mournful rigor of winter, nature would explode with life, the splendor of an inevitable new birth, in an endless cycle. But not there. Not at Camp 9. Not for Tank 9.

Everything was ending in there. Nothing would begin anew.

What would happen to all the corpses that were amassed in there? Would another Cleansing be necessary, a definitive one? No, the time for great works was over. They would simply leave them there. Putrefying, rotting, stored in the greatness of that decaying mausoleum. Even while he would be lying in the sun, in his island, at the Bahamas, they would keep dying, in silence, in darkness. They wouldn't stop disintegrating for a single moment, screaming the mute horror of their condition.

* * *

In the morning of December 17th, at 5:45 P.M., he woke up with an idea nailed to his brain.

He had dreamt of Lucas, the guest that had caused him so many problems when unloading him. Trapped in the Shutter, he kept repeating: "*I'm waiting for you I'm waiting for you I'm waiting for you…*" Nothing new. He had met him in his dreams many times before. But his face had started dripping with sweat and, after wiping it with his sleeve, it wasn't Lucas anymore, but Alex. And he wouldn't stop saying: "*I'm waiting for you I'm waiting for you I'm waiting for you…*"

After that his faced had changed again, becoming a bearded man with wild eyes who kept on renewing that dark promise. In that moment, Giovanni was struck by the impression of having seen him

before, but after waking up all he was left with was a vague feeling of familiarity. He knew that the craziest truths revealed during sleep by the psyche are like fresh water at the bottom of the well, with nothing more than a broken bucket to try and gathering it.

But a tiny splinter of suspicion trapped in his mind made him do something that he would normally define *hopeless*, but that in that moment seemed to him as reasonable as going to the kitchen, heat up a cup of coffee and then go back to bed, waiting for the right moment to act.

* * *

After receiving the fax announcing the two daily deliveries (they were always about the same amount), at 8:10 A.M. he wrote his curious request through the Postman: "*Considering the upcoming end of my term, is it possible to receive some information on the Keeper that preceded me?"*

The *beep* came after nine seconds. "*For what reason, Keeper Corte?"*

Ah, for what reason, the ask… well, let's see…

"If I should ever meet him one day, I would like to talk to him about the experience we have in common."

Could it be enough? It was impossible to say. But it was worth a try.

He glanced at the well. The usual, desolate sight. It would miss it. It was incredible, totally crazy. Or maybe it was normal and inevitable. He would miss almost everything from the Tank. After a year even the darkest and most tormenting shadows, when they are about to fade forever, acquired soft, nostalgic tones. He kept looking at the amoeba made of many small phosphorescent specters, so familiar in its movements, so hypnotizing, so…

The buzzing of the fax was a sudden stab to the heart.

A sheet of paper crawled out of the fissure and Giovanni had to shake his head to get his thoughts back on track.

What…?

He saw the the console before him rotate slightly rightwards and at the same time he was under the impression that his chair for dragging him backwards. But it lasted for just one second.

From the paper rectangle he had in his hands a bearded man was staring at him. It was a low-quality, black and white picture, probably obtained by zooming a passport photo, but it was enough to superimpose it on the memory of the face he had seen in his dream and remain widemouthed.

Under the photo were written the same aseptic data one may find

on an ID card. Name: Dino. Surname: Bastiani. Place and date of birth followed (he was merely two years older than him), address, hair and eye color, profession (student), marital status (unmarried). Giovanni wondered whether the stupor in the form of dizziness was because he had recognized – or believed he had recognized – in that photo the man in his dream, or the fact they had answered him in such a thorough, almost flagrant way. He was so used to the silence and discretion that receiving such an answer to a useless question like that one made him cringe.

He looked closer at that expressionless face.

"And so you are… Dino, uh?" Until that moment, that guy had always been an unidentified *predecessor*, the one that for one hear had roamed through those same rooms, had the same nightmares and hopes, who had supposedly written a diary full of nonsense, but it wasn't actually true…

He stared at the picture he had received by fax, impressed on the paper by the toner, its lights and shadows, that varied spot of ink to whom he was talking and calling him Dino, and almost smiled.

How could I dream of you if it's the first time I see you?

The answer came by itself that same night.

It took him all day to slowly climb up from the depths of his memories, but eventually he surfaced like the body of a drowned men, blotted, awful to look at. And then Giovanni understood.

It was 2:57 A.M. when he looked at the screen of his alarm clock. He couldn't get to sleep since he went to bed a couple of hours earlier. He watched TV until late, pretending to follow an action movie full of stuntmen jumping off race cars, but he couldn't prevent his mind from digging and digging…

And finally, from a darkness only apparently impenetrable the spark of an answer came. He sat on the edge of his bed, breathing him deep the cold darkness enveloping him like a wet blanket. It wasn't the first time he saw that men. That's why he had dreamt of him…

He could check, if he wanted to. He had but to sit at the Control, before the Well, turn on the playback mode and go backwards and backwards…

But it wasn't necessary. The certainty with which he had come to that conclusion made further investigation utterly futile. He *knew* he was right, just like when only one card remains unturned on the table: there's no need to turn it to know its value.

Everything finally fit. The fact that they had sent him the complete list of the casualties on the day of the assault and had given him all the information he had asked for…

They had pleasantly surprised him with that sudden openness towards him; but reading everything under a new light, that behavior

hid sinister implications. They had satisfied his requests because he would have no way of divulging what he knew. He would never meet that a Dino Bastiani. He would never write a book or release interviews or tell his experience in any way.

It was incredible how his memory could remember a face registered practically one year earlier, when he had looked into the Well for the first time, upon arriving at the Tank. That man at the center of the screen, the one talking to the camera – talking to *him!* – who had sunk when the bodies under him had moved… was the Keeper that had preceded him. And he had been *unloaded*.

What did he do to deserve such fate? Nothing. Absolutely nothing, if not living in there for a whole year. Had that man done something wrong and been convicted for it, they would have no doubt told him: it would have served as a warning, a valid deterrent against improper behavior. They had thrown him in the Shutter simply because it was how things were meant to be. Nobody could leave. *Unpunished.* Oh, how sad was the motto looming over the headboard of the bed: *Nemo me impute lacessit.* As if the Tank itself was saying it to anyone who indulged for too long in its sick seduction. So… would it be his fate, too?

There, immobile, clad in darkness and the silence giving it form, sitting on the edge of the bed, his naked feet on the ice cold floor, Giovanni hid his face in his hands and let himself be devastated by loud, coarse sobs mixed with tears and laughter, until he fell on the mattress and lost himself into the void until morning.

26 – Islands

The last, grey days of the year passed slowly. Even Christmas, which usually soothed Giovanni's soul with the sweetness of his memories, came and silently crept away, leaving behind a bitter aftertaste. No colorful lights, decorations, snows or songs. All the joys he had come to know with his family when he was a boy, a kid, nor burnt his memory like a thousand small braziers; he wanted to cool them off throwing buckets of that cold water adultness can pour remorselessly on the warmth of infancy, but he couldn't. Like every year, he whispered prayers and wishes for his parents, then closed that window from which nothing but pain could get in.

The small dumbbells were put back in the wardrobe and the books forgotten. The calendar in the vestibule kept marking a day in September (he hadn't touched it since the day of the assault).

During the last week the deliveries decreased even more. Giovanni kept on working with clockwork efficiency. He didn't say useless words to the Guards, but couldn't help noticing they often glanced at him, studying him with a hint of perverse curiosity, maybe. As if they *knew*…

And of course they did. None of them bade him farewell like it was expected in case his work at the Tank would serenely come to its natural end and he was about to leave freely. They would have shaken his hand, smiled at him, maybe wished him good luck for the future, joked about the money waiting for him…

They could pretend, actually. But they apparently didn't feel like cheating in such a mean way and they preferred leaving coldly like usual. Giovanni appreciated that.

The last food provisions and laundry service arrived on the 29th. On time until the end.

He had taken on the habit of eating in utter silence, raising from time to time his gaze on the dark screen looking at his reflection imitate his movements like a monkey.

He passed much of his time at the window, trying to imagine what good things could still be out there, on the outside. Was there an island? Maybe. There were *a lot.* Everywhere. Each place was an island. *The Tank* was an island…

Will you manage to go back to living, Giovanni? After all this*?*

It was a good question. Ot a terrible one. Depending on the point of view. But it was destined to remain unanswered, like all the questions that were born and died – sterile, useless – inside those curved walls.

* * *

The day before the last of the year (only one double delivery in the morning), in the late afternoon he received a fax on headed paper. "*Being unable to do so personally due to undelayable business, gen. A. Stevanich has charged us with expressing the NMO's gratitude for your work. We also inform you that this morning's delivery was the last for Tank 9. Since the operative arc of the Camp is coming to an end due to technical reasons, tomorrow you will be exonerated from service. Two people will come at 8:00 A.M. to assist you in the furlough operation.*"

A signature followed. And that was all.

Giovanni read it from the top, to be sure he wasn't overlooking anything. It was really over. Not even a personal greeting from Stevanich. He expected him to come there and shake his end, looking him dead in the eye. And tell him unequivocally how things really were. But there was other *undelayable business*. It didn't matter.

The following day, at 8:00, then.

"They will come to assist me in the furlough operations…"

It was a nice, well studied expression. With that kind of language one could say anything, however atrocious, making it sound like a common bureaucratic praxis.

He crumpled the fax and threw it in the bin.

* * *

He thought about running away. At night, through the Escape. He would cross the whole Camp 9, away from the Center, he would find a hole, jump over the fence…

(*Do you really think there will be nobody on watch out there? Nobody to swoop in on you in the exact moment you touch the ground with your feet? Do you remember how things went for Alex? You can't get out of the Camp, you know that.)*

No, there was no way out. And what life could he lead after all, even if he was lucky enough to make it? Hunted down like a rabid fox. With no place to hide. And with no one to trust. They would catch him in a few hours.

No, there was no way out, at all. He would only waste time and energy, when both were about to end.

He didn't eat that evening. He didn't gather his things or pack his bags. He left everything as it was, turned the lights off and went to bed.

He knew how things would go. He had no intention of leaving.

27 – The Shadow of the Tank

The alarm clock went off at 7 o'clock, but Giovanni wasn't sleeping. He didn't sleep all night.

He re-lived every single day he had passed in the Tank; every single hour inside those walls had ticked together with his heart, without missing a beat. He still remembered what was in his head, full of wonderful hopes, when he first got in. Now little remained of those dreams. He realized that bitterly, but unsurprisingly. He had breathed the shadows, fed on death; he had quenched his thirst by imagining acid and blood… for too long. He would never get rid of it. His soul was so full of horrors that thinking of purifying it would have been silly. He had fooled himself until the last moment, but he couldn't do anything more than acknowledge it. Staying there was his only way out.

He dressed up without caring about stumbling due to weakness. He drank some orange juice to feed his willpower. Then he waited at the window.

At 7:56 – when the sun had started rising, invisible from his point of view – a van left the almost completely desert Center and went towards the Tank. An oblique light flooded its route, freeing itself from the shadows, shining intermittently on the dark green hood.

Good. It was time to go.

Before exiting the apartment Giovanni stopped on the Control's doorway. He thought back to all the work he had done in there, all the things he read, wrote, filled out. The Register was updated to the previous day in an impeccable way. They had no way of accusing him of leaving something behind. He had one thing left to do.

Inside the Well, the phosphorescent amoeba fluctuated and stirred in its amniotic darkness, restless as ever.

Giovanni didn't hesitate. He extracted his Beretta, extended his arm and shot. Some sparks and shards of glass answered the detonation. A strong smell of burning circuits came from the shattered screen, but quickly dissolved like the echo of the noise that had once and for all closed that door on another world.

Well done.

He could exclude that the two men had heard something. The vehicle was probably stopping in front of the building in that exact moment.

He closed his eyes and started counting under his breath: "One… two… three…"

He thought that the two soldiers who had been sent to deal with its furlough were the same that had escorted him on the first day of

the year, the sergeants before whom he had sworn his oath. He had no real reason to believe so, but just had to listen to his guts to be sure.

"Eleven… twelve… thirteen!"

He opened his eyes. In that precise moment the Spy flooded the vestibule with red light and its buzzing echoed dully ripping the silence apart for a few seconds. A coincidence? Maybe. But Giovanni liked to think that he was so synchronized with the strange laws of the Tank that he could foresee any oddity.

He opened the reinforced door and left the key in the lock. The small metal tetragram clinked for a few seconds, then stopped.

The engine, tie-rods and wheels loudly made an effort to pull up the elevator cabin. If the NMO ever wanted to use it again, it would probably need some serious maintenance. But since it was probably it's penultimate run, all those creaks would give them no more trouble.

Giovanni moved next to the Shutter, where for hundreds of times he had waited the arrival of new convicts. He stood in the typical position of a soldier at ease, his legs slightly spread and his hands behind his back

(*Do you really want to do this?*)

When the cabin reached the floor and the two shutters opened, he wasn't surprised to see the two sergeants – *yes, it's them, I knew it!* – with the same martial pace, the same by the book expressions. Until he would get to know his names, he would call them Thick and Thin. They hadn't changed at all in a year's time. Maybe things don't really change out there, despite the appearances. The Tank was different. To him, in a year, everything had changed. He had lost *everything*. Once he could see an island, far on the horizon. But the route had changed. Too many storms during the journey. Too many tears on the sails, on the hull, on the heart. And now, after months of wandering with no map whatsoever, drifting, there came the immense vortex…

"Good to see you again, Keeper Corte." Thick said.

"Good to see you too, friends. Are you here to… help me with the furlough operation, I suppose."

The two soldiers exchanged an oblique look and Giovanni thought that if they had been fat, wore top hats and had long knives in their hands, they would be exactly like the two executioners who took away mister K to execute him in the final scene of *The Process*.

(Do you really want to do this, Giovanni?)

"I have no choice."

"What did you say, Keeper?"

Thick and Thin were standing side by side, a couple of meters away from him. Giovanni showed his hands, which up to that moment were hidden behind his back, relishing the sight of the grimaces

deforming their faces as soon as they saw the Beretta. But the surprise lasted for just a couple of seconds: they immediately extracted their weapons and aimed them at him with ferocious determination.

"Put it down, Keeper." Thick growled.

Thin didn't say anything. He clenched his teeth so much that they started creaking.

"I'm not the Keeper anymore. My name is Giovanni."

He kept hanging on to his Beretta without aiming it on the two soldiers. He had no intention of shooting.

"Ok, Giovanni. Now put it down. Don't force us to…"

"To do what?"

The two looked at each other again.

"Never mind", Giovanni added. "It doesn't matter."

Right. Nothing had anymore.

With precise movements he holstered the Beretta, then he unfastened the holster from his belt and, bending slightly, made it slide on the linoleum towards Thin's feet. The two sergeants sighed in unison. And the weapons disappeared.

The neon lamps embracing the Ring crackled and the light dimmed sensibly. Half of the white tubes went off and the soldier's and Giovanni's still shapes faded suddenly, losing consistency and depth. From the Center, they were already de-activating some of the Tank's electrical lines. The end was nigh. He could hear the vortex drawing near…

It was Thick who talked first. But now that the initial tension had reduced, he had to clear his throat before speaking. "Keep… Giovanni, we are here in the name of the New Moral Order…"

"I know."

"…and it's out duty to inform you that we can't let you go."

Maybe, after that statement, the officers were used to complaints, protests, pitiful scenes, crying, screams, escape attempts…

But Giovanni didn't move, he just kept staring at the soldier with no recognizable emotion in his eyes.

Thick glanced at his partner, disoriented, the went on: "Do you… understand what I just said?"

Giovanni nodded. "Yes, I do. I did a while ago."

Thin coughed, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Thick squeezed his eyes as to focus on the shape in front of him. "Good", he said. "And… so?"

"So *what*?"

"Are you going to give us problems, or?"

Giovanni felt his soul invaded by an endless tiredness. And he also felt nauseated by all those empty words, all those sounds creating a useless dialogue between ghosts. He breathed in deeply and

gathered thee strength to speak again. “Did you bring the band?”

Thick hesitated, evidently disconcerted by that demonstration of coldness. “Yes, but if you prefer…”

In answer Giovanni turned around and put his hands behind his back. He heard the two sergeants approach and in a few seconds the plastic band was tightened around his waists.

“He also have a pill”, Thin said, talking for the first time. “If you want.”

“No, I don’t. Do what you have yo do, now. And do it quick, please.”

Thick moved to the panel, while the neon lights wavered again.

Giovanni stood in front of the Shutter and it wasn’t easy for him to see his reflection on the glass. It was the light’s fault, it was too dim. Or maybe he wasn’t there anymore. It could very well be a dream. Another one. The last one. He closed his eyes asked: “Can you tell something to general Stevanich on my behalf?”

Thick was busy inputting the right sequence, so it was Thin (no more that a voice behind his back, in the half-light) who answered. “Ok.”

“Tell him he was right about the need of facing one’s fear sooner or later. And tell him that I am not afraid anymore.”

He wondered if it was really true, but he couldn’t answer. He was looking at his greatest fear dead in the eye. The one that would never let him go on with his life if he hadn’t indulged it, *loved* it. The Tank – with its sorrowful shadow of horror, death, and despair – would always darken his life, had he turned his back on it.

There can be no Heaven if there is Hell.

Now!

The door slipped away with an exhausted puff. Giovanni breathed in deep, driving away the tears. Then he took a step into the Shutter.

Don’t think, Giovanni. Don’t think, don’t think, don’t think…

He heard the two soldiers speak under their breath. Then Thin said: “We could shoot you in the head with your gun, say you killed yourself.”

Giovanni’s heart shrunk. It was a powerful temptation. He would cross the abyss in a moment, without suffering… but he would never really get rid of it. He would never be *redeemed*.

“I told you”, he answered without opening his eyes, “that I’m not afraid.”

Another handful of silent grains fell down inside the hourglass, then Thick’s broken voice put an end to everything. “Goodbye, then.”

A puff, and the Shutter’s door cut the world away.

Giovanni opened his eyes and saw nothing but darkness. His lips moved to ask his mother and father for forgiveness. He felt a fire in

his heart, like a small star burning in its stead.

Every single fiber of his body trebled when he heard that noise (*clang!*), louder and neared than he had ever heard it. It was the Suffering's voice calling him opening its arms of glass and metal. The reek of blood and decomposing beasts filled his nostrils, but what really left him breathless was the silence. He had imagined that from the bottomless pit before him a wave of screams and laments would rise, but he heard nothing more than the cry of his own soul. He thought that in his whole life he had never known a fear so great.

But it was right, it was *necessary*.

A buzzing, a noise under his feet…

Giovanni, finally forgetting himself, managed to smile.

Epilogue

January 1st. 7:45 A.M.

A layer of hoarfrost covers like ephemeral white mildew the landscape of beaten earth, stones and clumps withered stems expanding out of sight on the other side of the fence. The whole Camp 10 is immersed in is pale isolation and the cold breeze blowing from north pushes the boy's gaze forward. There, in the distance, about five hundred meters away from where he is, a cylindrical, colossal, snow white construction rises.

Tank 10. Superb. So beautiful as to live him breathless.

In the building serving as operative center many soldiers are already working, but won't open the gates before 8:30. It doesn't matter. He will wait.

He closes his gloved fingers around the links and watches. He is only twenty-four. And they told him he is the youngest Keeper the NMO has ever designated. Pride drips from his lucid eyes, which close a little to mitigate the effect of the cold air.

The guests will start arrived at about 9:00 and at 10:00, so the program said, the inauguration ceremony will commence. It will be an exciting moment. There was even a small stage, with decorations and flags with the tetragram on them, from which general Aurelio Stevanich will give a speech.

The boy dreams that maybe he will be called and publicly introduced in a jubilation of applause and fanfares. Maybe. Or maybe not. What's important is that for a whole year he will be the lord of that wonder, and that was enough to make him feel omnipotent.

From the east, the first gold-colored rays climb over the horizon and illuminate the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Ferrara in 1965, he makes his debut in 1989 with the collection *Ombre – 17 racconti del terrore.* He ties with the roman movement Neo Noir and publishes short stories, articles and translations or magazines and anthologies for several publishers.

His are the novels inspired by *Deep Red* and *Suspiria* by Dario Argento for Newton & Compton. He collaborates for several years with the fantasy culture monthly magazine *Mystero*; for the publisher *Profondo Rosso* he translates the essays *H.P. Lovecraft: Dreamer on the Nightside* by F.B. Long and *Oedipus and Akhenaton* by I. Velikowsky, and the novel *The Devil's Bride* by S.Quinn.

Among his collections of short stories there are *I racconti della piccola bottega degli orrori* (Mondo Ignoto 2002), *La fiera della paura* (Mondo Ignoto 2004), *Striges* (Robin 2005) and *La notte chiama e altre storie* (2011, with Luigi Boccia), and the one-shot *I burattini di Mastr'Aligi* (Nero Press e-book 2014).

He also published the novels *I Ragni Zingari* (Edizioni XII 2010, then Nero Press e-book 2014), winner of the "Premio Polidori" in 2013, and *Madre nera* (Crac Edizioni 2013).

For Dunwich Edizioni he has already published the short story *I buoni e i cattivi* in the digital anthology *Poker d'Orrore* (2014).

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